during 'Kennedytime' with a staggering archival fidelity. [...] the painstakingly rendered parking meters, textile patterns, vintage appliances and record sleeves are woven into a meticulous backdrop that allows us to believe in and surrender to the story completely" (Bechdel, "Introduction" n. pag.).

Stuck Rubber Baby was published in 1995 by Paradox Press, a division of DC Comics. Whereas DC Comics is a large mainstream comic book publisher best known for its superhero fare, Paradox Press was expressly established to publish non-fantasy graphic novels. *Stuck Rubber Baby* was released to enormous critical acclaim, winning "Eisner and Harvey Awards in the U.S., a Comics Creators Award in the U.K., a *Luchs* Award in Germany, a 2007 *Saló del Còmic de Barcelona Award* in Spain, and a 2002 *Prix de la critique* at the Angouleme International Comics Festival in France. *The Comics Journal* also included *Stuck Rubber Baby* among its listing of the '100 Best Comics of the Century'" (Cruse, "About"). Despite being a critically successful release by a mainstream publishing house, *Stuck Rubber Baby* never quite became the commercial sensation that *Maus* had been and that *Fun Home* would later become. Cruse states, "When *Stuck Rubber Baby* came out, it was pretty much ignored by most of the mainstream press. It did get some reviews here and there, but, for example, it did not get a review in the *New York Times Book Review*. The book had a hard time breaking through to readers who might be interested who didn't already know my work from the work I had done in the gay community" (Seven). Commentators have attributed this relative lack of commercial success to *Stuck Rubber Baby* being ahead of its time both with regard to its format as a graphic novel (Heller et al.) and with regard to its controversial subject matter (C. Camper and Bechdel, "Introduction"). The fact that it was re-released in 2010 with new cover art and a new introduction by Bechdel speaks to the comic's enduring appeal and the continued resonance of its central themes with audiences fifteen years after its original publication.

4.2 A WINDOW SEAT TO HISTORY?

Before I delve into my analysis, I would like to clarify *Stuck Rubber Baby*'s relationship to real-life events because my analysis will, at time, engage with questions of historical plausibility. I would like to show from the start that historical plausibility is something the graphic novel actually tries to achieve so that it only makes sense to analyze it with respect to the historical circumstances it seeks to portray. Cruse himself has commented extensively on this question. As to the ac-

tual people and events in the book, Cruse is very clear: "It's fiction, and none of the characters match their real-life counterparts when it comes to specifics" ("Long and Winding"). However, in his keynote address at the *Queers and Comics* conference in New York City, Cruse also related,

> Toland and I do have some things in common: We're both gay and we spent a lot of time trying not to be gay. We both became accidental fathers. We both grew up in Southern cities that behaved badly. Neither one of us were of much use to the Civil Rights Movement. We were sympathetic, but we didn't believe we could really change anything. We both had our horizons expanded by hanging out with friends who were less self-absorbed than we were.

On the question of how autobiographical *Stuck Rubber Baby* really is, he writes, "readers should never assume that any particular incident in the book is part of my actual life experience, since *Stuck Rubber Baby* is a big gumbo made of all kinds of ingredients, many of which spring fully from my imagination. But bits of my life are definitely in there" ("Long and Winding"). He also writes, "many of the feelings the story deals with relate closely to feelings I experienced as a college-age kid" ("Long and Winding"). Thus, while not being a historical account of actual events, the graphic novel nevertheless aspires to be a truthful portrait of what it *felt like* to be a young white man who suspected he might be gay in the South in the early 1960s.

Cruse went to great lengths to establish the truthfulness and 'believability' of *Stuck Rubber Baby*'s setting. He writes,

> When I began drawing *Stuck Rubber Baby* I worried that readers might not believe enough in my characters' respective realities to care what happened to them [...]. I was all too aware that my strengths as an artist did not include a mastery of realistically proportioned human anatomy. Nobody was going to be tricked by my drawings into thinking that my panel frames were windows through which the struggles of actual human beings were being observed [...]. So my goal was to evoke as much as possible the textures of life as it was lived down south in the early Sixties [...]. That way my readers own memories would be triggered, coaxing those readers by sheer familiarity to let my drawing be springboards into the realer worlds inside their heads. ("Book Notes")

Cruse employed a host of techniques to achieve this effect. For one, he included references to actual historical people and events, such as the Kennedys (1; 7), the murder of Emmett Till (2), or the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom in 1963 (101ff). He also took great care to plot his story so that its timeline did not

conflict with any major historical events. For example, because he wanted to avoid having to show how the Cuban Missile Crisis or the assassination of John F. Kennedy would have affected his characters, he squeezed his story in between these two reference points in U.S. history ("Long and Winding"). He also included many references that were fictional, but evocative of real-life counterparts:

> Although the city in which my story is set is fictional, I tried to visually pepper my book's pages with echoes of images that some older readers might remember from the news reports of Birmingham's racial strife forty years ago. Both my fictional Melody Motel and the Rattler Hill Hospital for Negroes, for that reason, are based on analogous Birmingham institutions that had high profiles during the Civil Rights era. ("Long and Winding")

In the same way that Clayfield is a fictional version of Birmingham, Alabama, Clayfield's police commissioner, Chopper Sutton, is a fictional version of Bull Connor, the Rhombus and Alleysax are based on actual gay and Black clubs in Birmingham respectively, and the Melody Motel bombing is a fictionalized version of the 16th Street Baptist Church Bombing in Birmingham.

Even though Cruse did not have a lot of money to conduct extensive research (keynote address), he nevertheless took pictures of actual buildings to serve as models for their *Stuck Rubber Baby* counterparts, read period newspapers, which inspired the fictional *Dixie Patriot*, carefully selected music from the 1960s to include in the story, researched actual jazz labels that could have produced Anna Dellyne's music, went to the Fashion Institute of Technology in Manhattan to consult old *Sears* catalogs to get detailed models of clothes and appliances from the 1960s, and reached out to other people who had experienced both the Civil Rights Movement and gay life in the South during the early 1960s ("Long and Winding"). Referring to Cruse's use of song lyrics that were popular during the 1960s, Simon Dickel explains, "Encountering these songs, readers are inclined to accept the depicted fictional world as close to what they know as the real world, a process which Roland Barthes has labeled 'reality effect.' Consequently, the songs authenticate the period of the narrated events as the 1950s and '60s and encourage readers to regard the events in the book as 'real'" (620). The same can be said of the inclusion of all the other period detail that Cruse so painstakingly rendered in the pages of *Stuck Rubber Baby*.

Cruse's design of the narrative situation further serves to make the comic feel authentic. On the very first page, an older Toland is established as the intradiegetic-homodiegetic narrator of the book's main events (Rimmon-Kenan 95f). Apart from the storytelling of the intradiegetic narrator, whose narration is ren-

dered either as direct speech in speech bubbles when he is pictured or as a sort of voice-over in the form of captions (mostly in rectangular boxes) when he is not pictured, there is no other verbal narration in *Stuck Rubber Baby*. However, since *Stuck Rubber Baby* is not only verbally narrated but also drawn, it is clear that there must also be an extradiegetic narrator, who visualizes the entire story, including the intradiegetic narrator himself (Rimmon-Kenan 95). Since the intradiegetic narrator is only shown in the act of narrating, but never in the act of drawing, the extradiegetic visual narrator has to be distinct from the older Toland, who functions as the intradiegetic narrator. However, *Stuck Rubber Baby* never draws attention to the existence of this extradiegetic narrator. Unlike the intradiegetic narrator, who is an overt part of the story, the extradiegetic narrator is completely covert (Rimmon-Kenan 97), thereby bolstering the illusion that the comic is indeed a window through which we observe the older Toland reminiscing about his life while somehow simultaneously 'seeing' his thoughts and memories. This technique makes the story feel personal and 'real,' making it hard to remember that Toland is not a real person and that the panels depicting young Toland and his friends are not actual memories.

Even though *Stuck Rubber Baby* is a historical account and not a chronicle of contemporary events like *Dykes*, both comics actually have a very similar claim to historical truthfulness: Neither comic depicts actual people, but both carefully attempt to situate their characters in the actual socio-political climate of their times to allow their readers to relate to their characters as if they were real people responding to the challenges of their respective circumstances. As my analysis will show, *Stuck Rubber Baby*'s at times greater fidelity to actual relations among Black and white, gay and straight people is one of its greatest strengths. However, like *Dykes*, it is also not immune to imagining a fictional world more palatable to white people than its real-life counterpart probably ever was. Furthermore, it is also important to remember in the case of *Stuck Rubber Baby* that it is *not* an autobiographical account of how things 'just happened to be,' but a carefully crafted novel conveying a particular message to its contemporary readers about how white gay men in the U.S. relate to racism and anti-racist activism in general and to the Civil Rights Movement in the South during the 1960s in particular.