

J. FETTER-VORM



Trinity conveys the power and paradox of the first atomic bomb.

Q&A Jonathan Fetter-Vorm

The graphic historian

New York-based author and illustrator Jonathan Fetter-Vorm makes hand-printed books on Darwin and other historical scientific subjects — including a hand-stitched treatise on surgical suturing. As he releases *Trinity*, a graphic history of the atomic bomb, Fetter-Vorm talks about crafting science chronicles.

NICK HIGGINS



Trinity: A Graphic History of the First Atomic Bomb

JONATHAN FETTER-VORM
Hall and Wang: 2012.
160 pp. \$22

How did you become interested in the history of science?

Growing up I thought that I was going to be a biologist, but my interest in the history of ideas took over. I did research into the invention of movable type, and how the printing press brought together

scientists, poets and illustrators during the Renaissance.

How did that lead you to print your own illustrated editions of science books from that time?

I like that period because self-taught people such as Leonardo da Vinci and Jesuit scholar Athanasius Kircher were defining what science meant. There wasn't a strong distinction between the wondrous and the demonstrably true. That informs how I approach illustration and bookmaking. By reminding readers that these theories that we hold to be objective laws of nature were

once just someone's hunch, I want to make science uncanny again.

How did you go about that with Darwin?

Rereading his books, I was struck by the imagery that Darwin had to invent to explain his ideas. My 2010 book *Incidental Sources with Subsequent Modifications* is an illustrated adaptation that lets fragments from *On the Origin of Species* (John Murray, 1859) mutate page by page in increasingly imaginative alterations and revisions.

And your book on sutures?

Early suture technique borrowed heavily from the craft of tailors. Joseph Lister, pioneer of antiseptic surgery, devised innovative and complex sutures using felt, wire and lead buttons. With *The Technic of Suture* (2009), I traced the echoes of this invention through various fields, from medicine to geology. I created an edition of five books, screen-printed onto felt that was treated with rabbit-skin glue and bound with suture stitches.

How did you approach writing *Trinity*?

My knowledge of the Manhattan Project was pretty sketchy and I knew nothing of the science of the atomic bomb, but I have always been intrigued by J. Robert Oppenheimer, one of the leaders of the project. He was such an enigmatic and ambivalent character: his opinions about the development and use of the atomic bomb were paradoxical and tortured. I wanted that sense of ambivalence to run through the story.

What difficulties did you encounter?

Showing what the inside of an atomic bomb looked like required almost as much imagination as drawing the inside of an atom. The government kept the structure of these devices secret. Even now, there is speculation about their inner workings. But the detonations were the hardest to draw; there are three in the book. For the Trinity test, the challenge was to compete with the beautiful, bizarre high-speed photos that the government took. I decided to use the Hiroshima detonation to depict damage to structures and not people. Nagasaki was the most difficult: days before the deadline, I was still struggling to draw something that one shudders even to imagine.

What should a good science illustrator do?

I want my illustrations to clarify what the readers may already know, and give them a map for what they might not yet know. Comics can serve as a visual shorthand for anything that is — like a fission reaction — invisible or incoherent. Something happens when the words and drawings come together: they can inspire wonder and, hopefully, a desire to learn more. ■

INTERVIEW BY JASCHA HOFFMAN