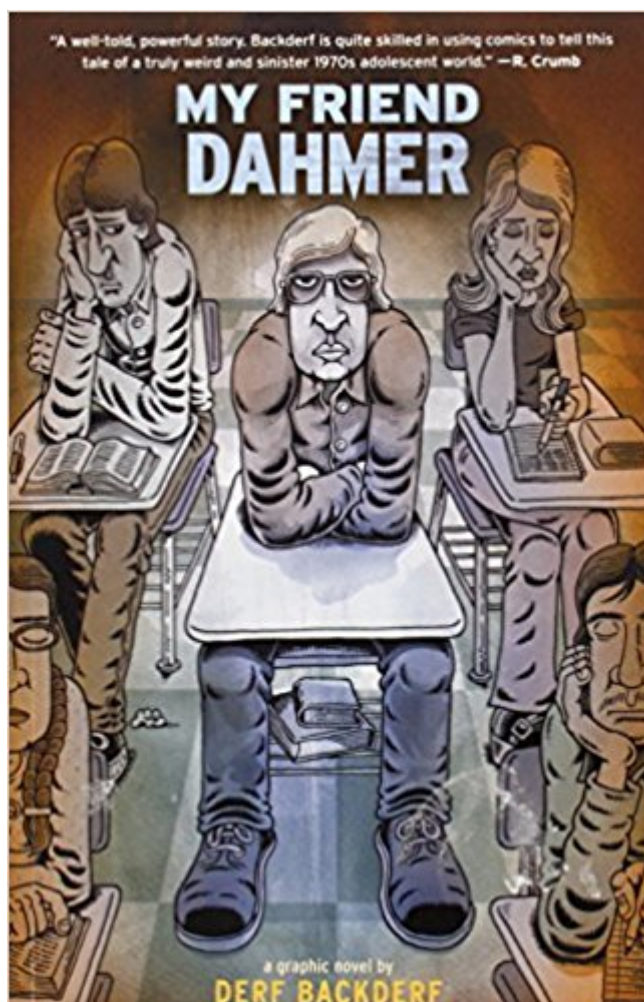


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My Friend Dahmer



Synopsis

NATIONAL BESTSELLER 2013 ALA/YALSA Alex Award 2014 Revelation Award at Angoulême 2015 ALA/YALSA Alex Award (Excellence in Narrative Nonfiction) — You only think you know this story. In 1991, Jeffrey Dahmer — the most notorious serial killer since Jack the Ripper — seared himself into the American consciousness. To the public, Dahmer was a monster who committed unthinkable atrocities. To Derf Backderf, "Jeff" was a much more complex figure: a high school friend with whom he had shared classrooms, hallways, and car rides. In *My Friend Dahmer*, a haunting and original graphic novel, writer-artist Backderf creates a surprisingly sympathetic portrait of a disturbed young man struggling against the morbid urges emanating from the deep recesses of his psyche — a shy kid, a teenage alcoholic, and a goofball who never quite fit in with his classmates. With profound insight, what emerges is a Jeffrey Dahmer that few ever really knew, and one readers will never forget. — Also available by Derf Backderf, *Trashed*. Find teaching guides for *My Friend Dahmer* and other titles at abramsbooks.com/resources. Praise for *My Friend Dahmer*: "The tone is sympathetic and enraged (— Where were the damn adults?—™), while not excusing or making the story unduly fascinating. Backderf's writing is impeccably honest in not exculpating his own misdeeds . . . and quietly horrifying. A small, dark classic." — *Publishers Weekly* (starred review)? "One of the best graphic novels I've read this year." — *USA Today's PopCandy* "One of the most thought-provoking comics released in a long time." — *Slate.com*? "Carefully researched and sourced with ample back matter, Backderf's tragic chronicle of what shouldn't have been is a real butt-kicker for educators and youth counselors as well as peers of other potential Dahmers. Highly recommended for professionals as well as true crime readers." — *Library Journal* "This isn't a cautionary tale. Its insight sharedinsight arriving too late to save Dahmer's victims, let alone Jeff himself, but perhaps soon enough to remind both teens and their caretakers that questioning peculiar behavior might be a better tack than ignoring or exploiting it." — *School Library Journal*? "Fortunately, cartoonist Derf Backderf isn't one to avoid the troubling, even terrifying, truths that lurk in the dark recesses of that notorious serial killer's early life and modern American life itself." — *Foreword Reviews* "A powerful, unsettling use of the graphic medium to share a profoundly disturbing story. . . . An exemplary demonstration of the transformative possibilities of graphic narrative." — *Kirkus Reviews* (starred review) "Masterful. . . a rich tale full of complexity and sensitivity . . . There's something about Dahmer's life and crimes that seems almost crafted for treatment in the murky world of comix. Yet it's empathy and nuance, not gore, that put *My Friend Dahmer* alongside Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home* and David Small's *Stitches* in the annals of illustrated literature." — *Cleveland Plain Dealer* "A new classic

of the graphic novel genre. . . . A moving book that qualifies as one of the great graphic novels, a work of art." "Creative Loafing "A well-told, powerful story. Backderf is quite skilled in using comics to tell this tale of a truly weird and sinister 1970s adolescent world." "R. Crumb? "Anyone who opens My Friend Dahmer to satisfy a morbid curiosity, and likewise anyone who expects to find no more than a cynical publishing venture here, is bound for disappointment. It is a horrifying read, yes, not so much for what it reveals about the sad early (and inevitably terrible) life of Jeffrey Dahmer, but because of what it reveals about the bland emotional landscape of Middle America, in this vision a petri dish for psychoses in many degrees and forms. Backderf's odd stylization, with figures that look like organic robots, is a perfect vehicle for this conception. His graphic approach is grotesque, droll, and it rags on reality as masses of kids knew and still know it. Lots of books exist about the agonies and cruelty of the adolescent high school experience, but few so compellingly bring us straight into that soulless environment, showing the ways it can shelter, allow to burgeon, and, at the same time, be completely blind to real madness. It wasn't easy reading this book, but I'm glad I did." "David Small, author and illustrator of Stitches, a National Book Award finalist and #1 New York Times bestseller "Stunning. Horrifying. Beautifully done." "Alison Bechdel, author and illustrator of Fun Home, a National Book Critics Circle Award finalist "My Friend Dahmer is a brilliant graphic novel and surely ranks among the very best of the form. Like Alison Bechdel's Fun Home, the book plumbs a dark autobiographical mystery, trying in retrospect to understand actions and motivations to piece together the makings of a tragedy. Like Charles Burns's Black Hole, it's a starkly etched portrait of the horror of high school in the 1970s. Comparisons aside, My Friend Dahmer is entirely original, boldly and beautifully drawn, and full of nuance and complexity and even a strange tenderness. Out of the sordid and grotesque details of Dahmer's life, Derf has fashioned a moving and complex literary work of art." "Dan Chaon, award-winning author of Among the Missing and You Remind Me of Me "Just when you think you know all there is to know about Jeffrey Dahmer " one of the most notorious criminals of the past century " along comes My Friend Dahmer, which adds significantly to our understanding of this rare form of psychopathology. The graphic novel format helps the reader appreciate the adolescent mind-set of Dahmer's high school classmates. Although none of those who grew up with Dahmer expected to hear what they learned on July 22, 1991, when he was caught, no one was really surprised, either. This unique book allows the reader to listen in on the fascinating reminiscences of those who watched the developing mind of a future serial killer." "Louis B. Schlesinger, PhD, Professor of Forensic Psychology, John Jay College of Criminal Justice "It'd be so easy to pigeonhole and think that the reason you can't stop reading My Friend Dahmer is

because it offers a voyeuristic peek inside the monster. And it does. But as it turns its self-aware eye on the boy who doesn't belong, the real magic trick is how equally hateful and sad you feel for the monster himself. This one's still haunting me." "Brad Meltzer, author of Identity Crisis and The Inner Circle, a #1 New York Times bestseller "As someone who walked the halls of Revere High School with both Backderf and Dahmer and was there from the beginning, I am astounded by the accuracy and truthfulness of this portrait. I know of no other work that so clearly shows the teenage days of an American monster, long before the rest of the world heard of him. Mesmerizing." "Mike Kukral, PhD, Revere High School class of 1978, Professor of Geography, Rose-Hulman Institute of Technology, author of Prague 1989: Theater of Revolution "If you want to read a heavy story about a disturbing teenager, My Friend Dahmer will certainly quench your dark little desires. But this book is about a lot of other things that matter much, much more: the institutionalized weirdness of the suburban seventies, what it means to be friends with someone you don't really like, a cogent explanation as to why terrible things happen, and a means for feeling sympathy toward those who don't seem to deserve it." "Chuck Klosterman, author of Sex, Drugs, and Cocoa Puffs: A Low Culture Manifesto and The Visible Man "A solid job. Putrid serial killer Jeffrey Dahmer's origins are explored in this fine book. Dig it I'll hang you out to dry." "James Ellroy, author of My Dark Places and L.A. Confidential

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Customer Reviews

I didn't intend to read this all in one sitting. I put it down once, because I was deeply, deeply perturbed and needed a minute to collect my thoughts. Then I picked it back up and read for a

couple more hours. It's not just Dahmer that's upsetting. In fact, he becomes a consequence of an inattentive, uncaring system. Seeing authority figures fail to execute their duties, and the consequent existence of the Dahmer who became infamous, was the truly upsetting part for me. Memoir, horror, tragedy, true-crime, perverse coming-of-age, My Friend Dahmer is chilling. I'm very careful recommending comics works to those that don't read many comics. This is an obvious pick. And if you do read comics regularly...why haven't you purchased this yet?

This is an amazing, very personal memoir of a high-school nobody who is now remembered as a monster. It in no way absolves Dahmer, but it humanizes him to the extent where we can see him as a person. Not that we can see what went on in his head, but the context in which he lost it. This is a very personal story, but Derf has filled it in with outside research (without stepping out of the personal story) and the (text) timeline at the end fills in the horror story for those who don't know any or all the story. I've been reading Derf for ages, and he's one of my favorites. I love his comix. His other book *Punk Rock and Trailer Parks* is a boisterous remembering of the punk era in the 80s. My Friend Dahmer is not happy or uplifting. But it's a gripping story of alienation, neglect and everyday inattention. All the characters you remember from high school are in this book. And also a serial killer.

First off, let me just say that I couldn't put this book down. It was both fascinating and disturbing and fulfilled that strange curiosity that comes up whenever you read an account of someone so disturbed that they engage in the most heinous acts imaginable. How could they be that way? What must go wrong inside of them to allow them to do such things? And what were they like as teenagers? Well, that last question may not be typical, and it was only after reading the premise of the book that I really thought about it. Would there be signs at that age? What is the reaction of people close to such psychopaths to learn about the reality that lies behind the mask of sanity? Well, in that department, My Friend Dahmer delivers. There's plenty an anecdote to inspire nervous laughter, wide-eyed disbelief, and stunned disappointment at all the missed opportunities that might have prevented such a despicable spree of murder. Dahmer's antics in high school were odd, to say the least, and betrayed very early on a remarkable lack of empathy and capacity for manipulation, as well as the growth of the necrophiliac desires that would prompt his many murders. But I think it's in Dahmer's capacity for manipulation that the book suffers. It seems to me that even with the benefit of hindsight, Backderf might be buy into Dahmer's story of himself a tad too much. Backderf (but he's not the only one) presents what he believes to be the motivation and psychological history

that led to the man Dahmer became: a broken home, absent parents, strange and shameful desires. It's a story that inspires pity (but not necessarily compassion, as Backderf himself writes). But is it the truth? After all the reading I've done on psychopathy and character disorders, I highly doubt it. The only 'witness' we have for what was really going on in Dahmer's mind during all these events is Dahmer himself, and psychopaths are experts at presenting themselves in a sympathetic light, no matter what degree of depravity they have sunk to. It's called impression management and it has one goal: to convince the person listening that the psychopath really isn't that different from you or me. It's a cover story to keep someone from reaching the conclusion that in reality, this person is a human predator, with absolutely no conscience or remorse. If you watch the clips of interviews with Dahmer before he was murdered in prison, you can see it in action: the way Dahmer uses the interviewer's questions and subtle suggestions to both admit what he can't reasonably deny, but frame it in such a way that it's not quite as bad as all that. He leaves the listener to fill in the blanks. This problem about the way we interpret the words of psychopaths, and all the other manipulation techniques they use, is discussed at length in George Simon's book *Character Disturbance: the phenomenon of our age*, which I'll be reviewing soon. So, if you want a bit more insight into the minds of people like Dahmer, read that one. It makes a good companion to *My Friend Dahmer*, which despite its flaws, was still pretty damn good.

Jeffrey Dahmer murdered 17 men and boys between 1978 and 1991. He became infamous after his 1991 arrest and 1992 conviction, when he received 15 life terms, only to be murdered by a fellow inmate in 1994. Dahmer has become part of America's serial-killer history and infamy, in part because of the gory horror of the murders which included rape, dismemberment, necrophilia and cannibalism. But before he was the 'The Milwaukee Cannibal' and 'The Milwaukee Monster', Jeffrey Dahmer attended Eastview Junior High and later Revere High School, with John Backderf (who illustrates under the pseudonym Derf and Derf Backderf). In fact, Backderf while not close friends with Dahmer, was part of the 'Dahmer Fan Club'; a group of self-proclaimed 'nerds' who were fringe-friends of Dahmer's, and in 1991 would be interviewed by detectives about Dahmer's first murder of a hitchhiker called Stephen Hicks. It was John Backderf's bizarre pseudo-friendship with the man who would go on to become one of America's most infamous serial-killers that prompted him to first write a short comic anthology about growing up with Dahmer, published in 1997. From there, Backderf explains in the preface to 'My Friend Dahmer', that he continued to muse on his high school memories of the boy, to the point that he released a self-published comic book version of what would later become the graphic novel 'My Friend Dahmer', published this year by Abrams

ComicArts. The novel follows Dahmer's schooling from the moment that Backderf actually remembers noticing him in Junior High. Through to the days before graduation and his last encounters with the now adult Dahmer who would go on to commit his first murder shortly thereafter. In the novel Backderf shines light on a loner teenager, struggling with a crumbling home life and frightening impulses; and when we wasn't fading into the background at school, he was being bullied by the jocks or relegated to a cafeteria table with the other 'freaks'. Reading Backderf's preface you get the impression that he has a small obsession with Dahmer, which is entirely understandable. For one thing, it's not many people who can claim they went to school with one of the nation's most famous serial-killers. And, in fact, in a chilling recount towards the end of the novel, Backderf shares the story of his high school friend, Mike, the last of their gang to interact with Dahmer when he saw him walking on the side of the road one night and offered him a lift home. Later, as the timeline of Dahmer's murders was constructed (he first killed at the age of 18) Mike would come to realize that as he sat in the Dahmer driveway, there was a dismembered body either stuffed in a drainage pipe beside the driveway, or in the back of Dahmer's car "which was parked just a few yards away." Such thoughts would no doubt swirl in a person's mind, and you'd think back to all those classes in which you sat next to a man who would one day commit such heinous acts. . For another, Backderf and his small, nerdy clique were probably the closest thing Dahmer ever had to a real friendship, and may well be who he spoke of in a 1993 interview with Nancy Glass for 'Inside Edition', when he said: "I had normal friendships in high school. . . and really never had any close friendships after high school." This is an unsettling thought while reading 'My Friend Dahmer', and I simultaneously praise and raise my eyebrow at John Backderf's honesty. Because you soon discover that the measly crumbs Jeffrey Dahmer probably mistook for friendship from Backderf and his gang was really quite awful. The 'Dahmer Fan Club' to which Backderf and his three close friends were part of was an inside-joke, of sorts, praising Jeffrey Dahmer's bizarre impersonations of a cerebral palsy sufferer (thought to be imitating a local interior decorator, who suffered from the condition, but in his research Backderf would discover was actually Dahmer imitating his own mother who was a depressive and on some 20 different prescriptive medications that made her twitch and lurch). 'My Friend Dahmer' proves to be a collection of Backderf's unsettling accounts of his personal interactions with Dahmer, and more thorough back-story he gathered from local residents, past classmates and teachers and then deeper diggings through FBI and television transcripts, interviews with lawyers and reporters from the time. Some recounts of Jeffrey Dahmer have clearly gone down in Revere High School history - such as the opening panels depicting Jeffrey showing a group of boys his 'hut', where he kept road-kill he stuffed into jars of acid (to study

the bones, he said.) Residents who lived near the tucked-away Dahmer residence would later confess to finding dead animals hammered to various telephone poles and trees, not thinking anything of it until much later, with Dahmer's 1991 arrest. But much of Backderf's back-story to Dahmer's formative years is gathered, directly and indirectly, from the man himself. This surprised me; I confess to knowing very little of the Jeffrey Dahmer case before I started reading 'My Friend Dahmer', but even finer details like Dahmer struggling with his homosexuality and dark thoughts of necrophilia seemed to be too much a shot in the dark. But, as it turns out, part of the reason for Dahmer's later notoriety is thanks to his awful honesty. As Backderf says in his notes; "Jeff was remarkably forthright with the police, unlike most serial killers, who are either pathological liars, like Henry Lee Lucas, or manipulative psychopaths, like Charles Manson. Dahmer was truthful and coherent." Indeed he was. Dahmer spoke candidly about his sexual impulses, his struggle with alcoholism (he was an alcoholic by the time he was a senior in high school, trying to numb his dark impulses) and the negative impact his parent's fighting, and later divorce, had on him growing up. 'My Friend Dahmer' is in many ways a dark, depressing read. Particularly when Backderf starts asking why adults never gave a damn about Dahmer's spiralling decline - his alcoholism, crumbling home life and ostracism in particular. In his preface, Backderf says: "It's my belief that Dahmer didn't have to wind up a monster, that all those people didn't have to die horribly, if only adults in his life hadn't been so inexplicably, unforgivably, incomprehensibly clueless and/or indifferent." This thought is maybe distilled in a small window of Dahmer's life, a week-long school trip to Washington D.C. when Dahmer's ability to lie creatively and astoundingly scored him and two classmates a meeting with Vice President Walter Mondale. A mind that could pull that off, on the spur of the moment, and later be capable of molesting children and killing 17 people, as Backderf says; ". . . what a waste." But Backderf makes it very clear that his sympathy for Dahmer ended the moment he killed; "He could have turned himself in after that first murder. He could have put a gun to his head. Instead he, and he alone, chose to become a serial killer and spread misery to countless people." 'My Friend Dahmer' is an unsettling read. And for me, newly initiated into the graphic novel form, it is a confusingly sad, impacting, disturbing and brilliant read that highlights what can be gained from the graphic medium. Backderf's artwork is sinister and detailed, often mixing his old high-school drawings of Dahmer with class photos (one in which a teacher blacked out Dahmer's face with a marker) - these images are much like the narrative story itself, with Backderf's personal recollections interspersed with hard facts gathered from various sources. I'm convinced that if Backderf hadn't been an artist, if he'd just written his high school memories of Dahmer mixed with his fact-finding then he would not have had a story worth telling. But it's Backderf's artwork that

disarms you and draws you into the heinously sad and frightening life of Jeffrey Dahmer - this lumbering, solitary drawn boy who seems to haunt the page, much the way that his memory obviously still haunts John Backderf.

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