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GRAPHIC MEDICINE: MEDICAL NARRATIVES AS GRAPHIC MEMOIR

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Medical Narratives as Graphic Memoir

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Abstract

In the last decade, the genres of graphic novels and graphic memoirs have not only made the transition from marginal to mainstream but many also have gained critical acclaim. Now, graphic storytelling is starting to emerge as a legitimate facet of medical narrative, ranging from those in which patients describe their experiences with illness to narratives in which one of the creators acts as witness rather than participant. In addition to examining several meritorious graphic memoirs that deal with aspects of medical experience – a man chronicling a mutilating childhood surgery for throat cancer; a young man dealing with cystic fibrosis; a woman describing her experience with breast cancer; a woman recalling her battle with anorexia; and a daughter coming to terms with her mother's Alzheimer's – this paper explores the collaboration between a scientist enduring a diagnosis of and treatment for thyroid cancer and a cartoonist/illustrator (myself) telling her story through images, dialogue and humor.

Some of the questions this paper addresses are: What is the role of illustrations in these narratives? What differences, if any, exist between narratives that are illustrated by the author, and those that are the result of collaboration? Can these graphic memoirs enhance not only the patient/subject's experience but also deepen the understanding of others -- medical professionals, family members, and people with similar diagnoses -- who are involved? This paper attempts to demonstrate that graphic memoirs about illness, with their integration of verbal and visual elements, their wholeness of approach, can deepen and enhance our understanding of our own narratives as well as the shared reality of others.

Introduction

At heart, human beings are storytellers; there exists nothing in human affairs that is not some form of tale. Disease itself is a state comprising several narratives: the pathologies that researchers study; the medical professionals who diagnose and treat; the patients who experience the symptoms and ravages of illness and endure the sometimes brutal remedies; the family members or other caregivers who struggle to respond; and the perceptions of those outside the clinical setting who try to tell their stories.

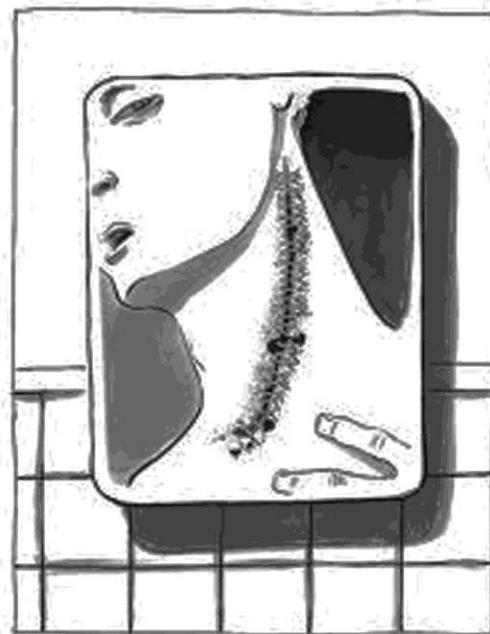
As the following memoirs demonstrate, illness is both an occurrence and an experience. A disease might attack a specific part of the body but the entire person is affected. The most current medical thinking is that serious illness is best treated by addressing the whole person. These memoirs, both the ones that are created by one individual and those that are the result of collaboration, are attempts to make medical experiences more profoundly whole.

One of the most difficult aspects of being a patient is the fact that illness isolates. Nobody's trajectory of symptoms, diagnosis, treatment and outcome is exactly like any other's. Memoirs about illness attempt to penetrate that solitude. Graphic memoirs take that process a step further: by enhancing narratives with images – sometimes harshly realistic, even exaggerated, sometimes whimsical or funny – and engaging our sense of communication beyond the linear, we are invited to approach the intertwined tale of patient and illness as a fully human story: multi-faceted, complex, sometimes tragic but also holding the possibility of transformation.

The Artist as Patient

David Small's childhood was not a happy one. His mother was angry and controlling, and his emotionally distant father, a radiologist, routinely dosed him with radiation for a chronic respiratory condition, a treatment that eventually resulted in a form of throat cancer. When Small was a teenager he underwent surgery to excise the tumor, an operation that involved the removal of one vocal cord, rendering him nearly mute.

His graphic memoir, *Stitches*, chronicles that journey, from mistreated child to silenced adolescent. While the memoir is only partly a medical story, that aspect – the radiation treatment and subsequent cancer – drives the narrative. The title derives from Small's visualization of his post-operative scar, a potent image that represents on several levels the magnitude of Small's loss:



FROM *STITCHES* BY DAVID SMALL

We see the stitches as huge, heavy, dominant: pushing Small's face partly outside of the visual frame. His surgical wound looks almost like a stapled mouth; by comparison Small's actual mouth appears reduced and ineffective. This image demonstrates how

using illustrations as an intrinsic part of a medical narrative can add dimension and meaning that words alone cannot. While we cannot share Small's pain, actually seeing through his eyes the image of how overwhelming his operation and its aftermath felt allows us in some way to participate in his experience. Small's memoir embodies the affecting metaphor of someone who had been silenced reclaiming his voice.

Similarly, Andrew Godfrey's "sicker than thou" cartoon series provide an entryway into a sphere that most of us will never know: the world of cystic fibrosis (CF). Godfrey suffers from that incurable affliction and, as he notes in talks that he gives about his illness and his graphic memoir work, he is approaching the outer limit of CF survivability. CF is the result of a gene mutation; sufferers are born with it and have to remain under constant medical supervision and treatment: it is an essential and inescapable aspect of their lives. However, Godfrey's work challenges the notion that this illness defines its victims. His strong, raw, defiant visuals, such as the one following, contradict the notion of the sad, sick kid in the wheelchair, the emblematic helpless and needy poster child.



© ANDREW GODFREY

Again, far more effectively than a solely verbal narrative could express, we *perceive* Godfrey's experience: the interplay of reality and hope, his outer circumstances and his inner world. Godfrey explains,

There are people who may think that graphic memoirs about death, disease, and mental health problems... are nothing but depressing affairs. But for me, these memoirs are filled with laughter and hope and paint a much more fully formed picture of what its like to live with illness, better than any poster child can hope to portray. They remind us that even those who are meant to be unemotional, unbiased, and strong, such as doctors, are just as vulnerable and flawed as the rest of us. They (graphic memoirs) have the capacity to make the alien and unknown into something relatable, beyond the confines of the poster child syndrome.

(Godfrey, graphicmedicine.com)

Graphic Medicine as Shared Experience

Most people do not endure childhoods as harsh as David Small's nor are most born with a consuming and ultimately fatal disease. However, most of us will encounter some form of serious illness in our lifetimes, and graphic memoirs can both capture an author's unique experience and help make that experience accessible not only to people who might fall prey but also for their medical caretakers and family.

Breast cancer is likely to strike one in every nine women – Marisa Acocella Marchetto was one such victim. Her vivid graphic memoir, *Cancer Vixen*, not only carries the reader along on her journey of diagnosis and treatment but also describes a life-changing experience, with its moments of hope and laughter as well as its dark periods of pain and despair, to which other breast cancer sufferers can relate, and learn.



FROM *CANCER VIXEN* BY MARISA ACOCELLA MARCHETTO

In this panel Marchetto vividly expresses the way that impending cancer surgery can create terrifying imaginings, a reassuring admission for others facing similar situations: *It's not just me*. She also infuses her very personal narrative with informative passages about treatment protocols and their side effects; without denying the seriousness of the subject, by her use of bright colors and humorously imaginative scenes, she transforms this solitary medical pilgrimage into an adventure that can be shared and, surprisingly,

occasionally, relished. Ariel Levy, in a review in the *New York Times*, writes, "... mostly, Marchetto's cartoons in this book are ebullient: cancer cells under the microscope are little green circles sticking out their tongues and giving you the finger; the grim reaper wields a vacuum cleaner; her higher self is a floating, one-eyed yogi with amazing abs" ("Sick in the City," web).

One of the attributes of anorexia is the way the illness distorts its victims' very sense of self: they simply cannot perceive accurately its bodily ravages. Lesley Fairfield's graphic novel *Tyranny* effectively exposes the disconnect between reality and illusion as her protagonist Anna, indisputably thin, still imagines herself as grossly overweight. Anorexia is visualized as "Tyranny," a skeletal figure, Anna's alter ego, who both is the voice of Anna's delusion and a portent of what Anna herself might become:



FROM TYRANNY BY LESLEY FAIRFIELD

A review in *The Globe and Mail* reads, "...The graphic form impels but doesn't rush the reader along with Anna on her dangerous dance with a severe and recurrent eating disorder. The malevolent squiggle that is Tyranny is never out of the picture for long" (lesleyfairfield.com). While Fairfield's images literally embody the deception, physical damage and emotional despair the illness causes, ultimately Anna's struggle and her triumph can offer other victims of anorexia a glimpse into the possibility of life beyond its grip.

Dana Walrath's graphic memoir *Aliceheimer's* is the story of her mother Alice's descent into, and transformation by, Alzheimer's. Walrath's narrative of her mother's degenerative illness and its salutary impact on their previously difficult relationship is accompanied by charming drawings featuring Alice, bemused and beatific, dressed in the text of *Alice in Wonderland*, as the figures of her children and dead husband hover around her.



© DANA WALRATH, ALICEHEIMER'S

The illustrations as well as the text depict the experience of Alzheimer's, both for Alice and Walrath, as one of gain as well as loss: Alice loses her memory but also her anger and criticism while Walrath gains a healed relationship with her mother. Not all cases of Alzheimer's are so benign; however, Walrath's graphic memoir demonstrates that hope and grace can be found in the unlikeliest of places.

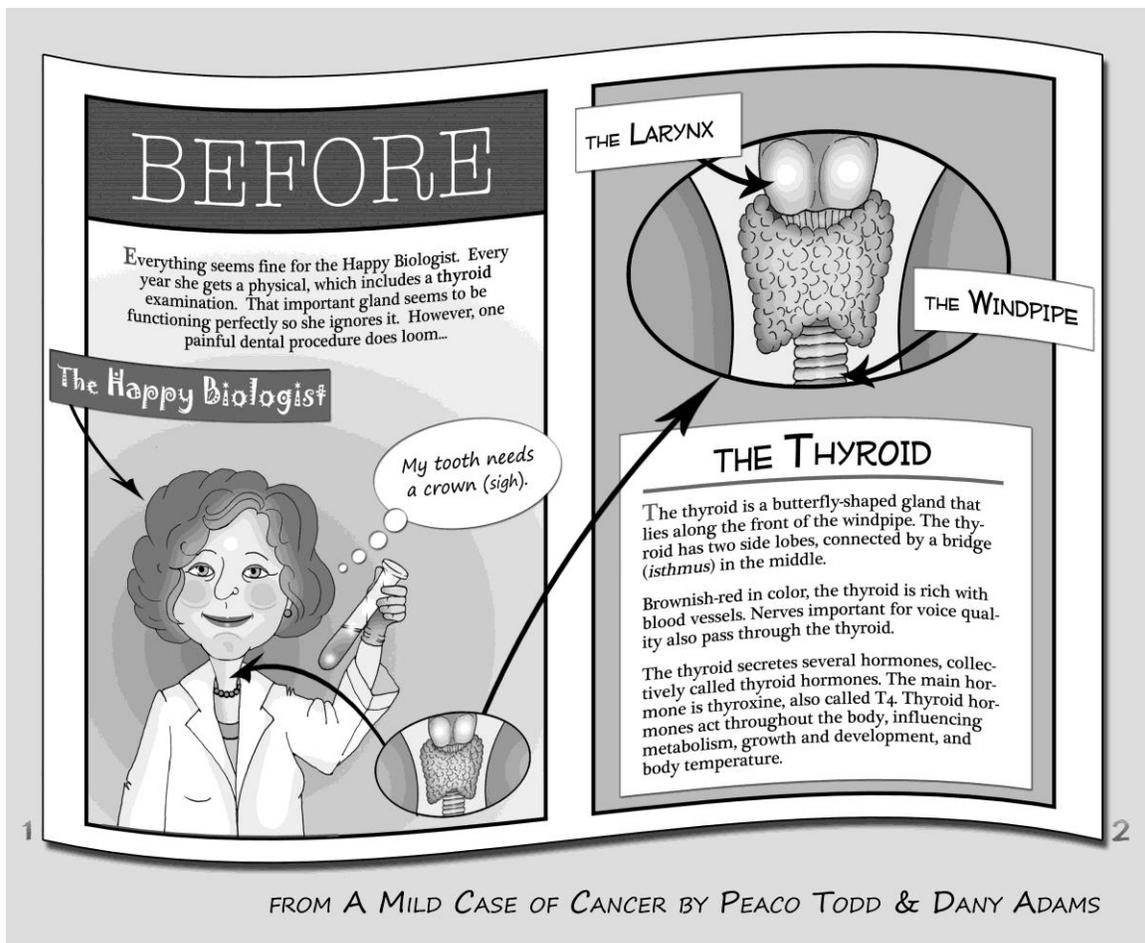
The Artist as Witness

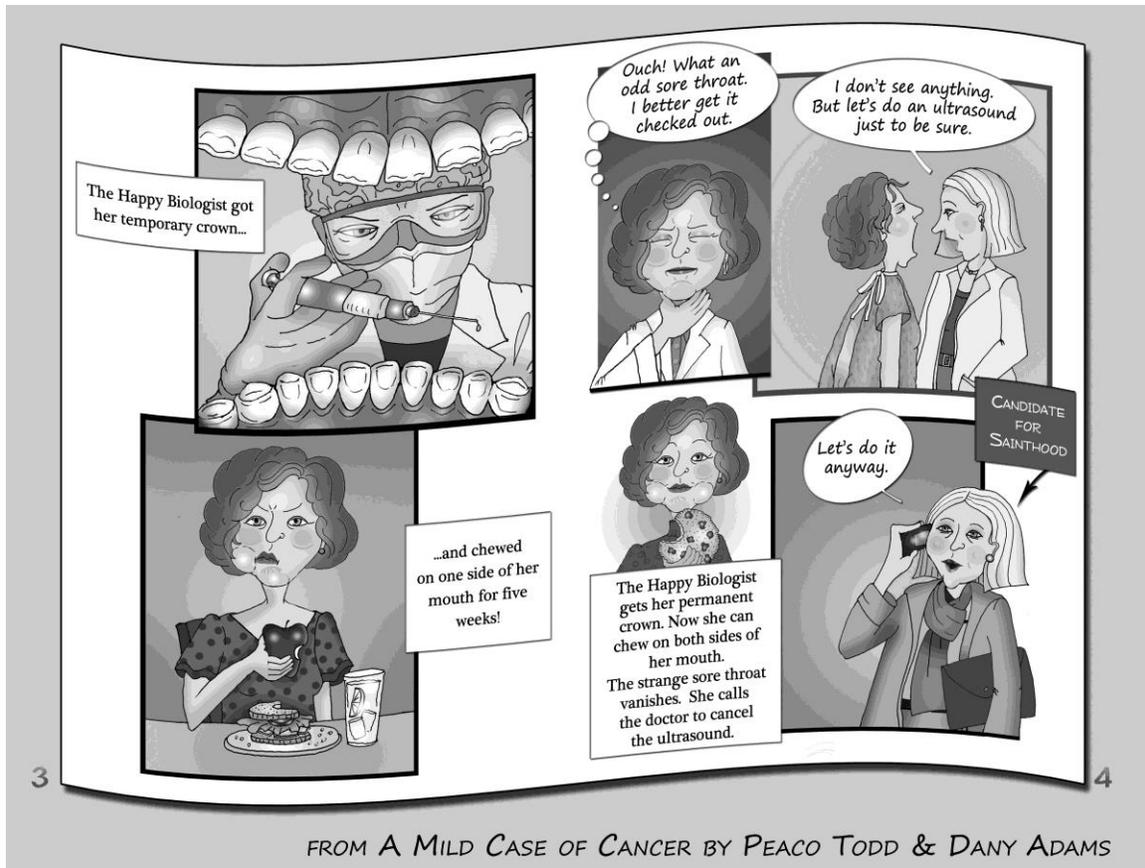
Each graphic memoir previously discussed is illustrated by its author; the experience of each illness is made more accessible, more whole, by the integration of two significant but different aspects of the author's perception. However, sometimes graphic memoirs, like Harvey Pekar's *American Splendor*, are the result of a collaboration between narrator – the subject of the memoir – and an illustrator. In that case, the artist serves as both interpreter and witness. Such is my collaboration with Dr. Dany Adams on a graphic memoir about her experience with thyroid cancer: *A Mild Case of Cancer*.

The challenge for the illustrator in depicting someone else's story is to find ways for the visuals to add elements that would be either elusive or cumbersome in the verbal narrative. Adams had written extensively about her experience, primarily in the form of informal emails to friends and family; as a biologist from a medical family, she brought formidable research skills to her quest to discover everything she could about her disease. Thus we had a great deal of material with which to work: accounts of the various medical procedures and personal reactions that had been composed while fresh in her mind; a veritable portfolio of the latest data about the causes, treatments and prognoses of thyroid cancer. *A Mild Case of Cancer*, while currently still in progress, offered us the chance to integrate this extensive information with cartoons aimed at leavening the narrative with

humor, whimsy and visual interest. Also, unlike graphic medicine memoirs whose authors also are the illustrators, we were able to give the Adams's character a dual role: that of someone undergoing a unique personal experience and a representative of anyone on a similar trajectory of diagnosis and treatment for this particular disease. Because I was interpreting Adams's experience rather than relating my own, I brought fresh eyes to her story and a critical distance that perhaps allows for more accessibility rather than less.

The following are four panels from this memoir-in-progress:





Conclusion

Disease is an intrinsic element in the fabric of the human condition; it is woven deep into the nature of corporeal. In fact, serious illness might be the most human of all life events as it carries with it the intimation of mortality. These memoirs in the emerging genre of graphic medicine demonstrate the paradoxical nature of disease. Illness indeed is a solitary happening, but it equally can be a shared reality. Every patient is alone but, at the same time, almost nobody is.

While the pain and fear that patients endure cannot be transferred, equally the process of telling these stories can shift and lighten the burden. These narratives open up our understanding, not just of our human state but also of the possibility of deep

connection. By employing multiple media they touch us on many levels. They create roadmaps into unknown territories, ones that others can follow and, in doing so, allow those of us on the outside become genuine companions on these journeys.

We tell our human stories not only to understand more profoundly what befalls us and what the events of our lives truly mean, but also to shout into the darkness and hear not just an echo but another soul calling back. We create and share our stories because we are not meant to go it alone. They remind us that while art cannot cure, it certainly has the power to heal.

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