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The Utilization of Comics to Establish Fluidity in Emotional Development

While often trivialized for its popularity among children in Saturday cartoons and comic books, the comics medium has proven itself as a complex and engaging means of weaving a narrative. This point is argued in Hillary Chute’s essay entitled “Graphic Women,” in which Chute expands on the medium’s capacity to hold meaning by citing “graphic narratives” (Chute 3) as impactful representations of trauma. Chute argues that the female authors of these narratives “do not project and identity that is defined by trauma,” (2) but, rather, one that aims to erase the universal stereotype of women as having been shaped by trauma. However, as Chute develops her pro-comics argument, she continually expands on comics as a platform for normalizing and representing trauma. Rather than distancing female—and male—authors from the trauma depicted in each panel, the comics medium acts to connect the reader to the events before them and effectively visualizes how traumatic events shape perspective and visual memory.

David Small’s Stitches traces the development of memory with respect to childhood abuse by establishing a fluid narration between reality and imagination. The fluidity of perspective can be seen through David’s interactions with his therapist, who appears as the white rabbit from Alice in
Wonderland in each of their interactions. In this instance, and throughout Small’s graphic narrative, imagination serves as a coping mechanism for un-dealt with trauma. Likewise, David can be seen dressing up as Alice during periods of neglect from his parents. This rejection of gender roles is two fold: while dressing up as a woman allows David to step outside of his abusive reality and assume a degree of normalcy in his domestic life, it is shown to garner an additional degree of violence from other children his age in the form of bullying—verbal and otherwise.

David's therapist appears as the white rabbit.

These instances of trauma, which are painted as factual events with fictitious elements, are connected by sequences of pure imagination, or abstract escapism, with Small often disappearing into his own drawings and daydreams. Small’s narrative style, however, encourages readers to approach these sequences with the same degree of seriousness as sequences of factual recollection. This can be seen through Small’s illustrations, which maintain a technique of sketchy lines and fluid shading in both aforementioned scenarios. In this way, Small’s narrative intent is kept constant, breaking only to recount his family’s oral history as passed down by his mother. The consistency in David’s narrative does more than connect elements of memory—it connects Small as an author to each cartoon representation of himself.

In Chute’s essay, she argues that cartoon visualizations of oneself establish a dichotomy between past and present, distancing authors from their past trauma to create a means of reflection and growth. However, the connection of author and caricature is vital to the reader’s grasp of trauma, as it allows for a level of realism which encourages empathy and understanding. Graphic narratives are unique in that readers can be acquainted with multiple cartoonizations of a memoir’s author on a single page. Readers are thus able to associate tonal shifts with variations in frame, image, and choice of moment rather than word choice alone, which creates a nuanced format not found in alphabetical texts. Repeatedly connecting with a real or, more accurately, nonfictional narrator forces readers to recognize the reality of the events unfolding in each panel, thus solidifying the text’s message and encouraging emotional
connection between the two. It is important to note, however, that the close association of authors with the trauma presented does not necessarily paint authors as victims of trauma—rather, comics identifies trauma as a catalyst for emotional development—and detriment—by showcasing its repercussions through visual memory.

In graphic novels with a single author-illustrator especially, the line between past and present is blurred in an effort to showcase how specific events shape one’s perception of reality. Graphic narratives present a unique way for authors to do this, as the format has built in narrative breaks called “gutters” that mirror memory lapses in recounting trauma. David Small’s Stitches and Tillie Walden’s Spinning trace childhood trauma across a multi-year span, and each respective author is shown growing up in this time, with the vast majority of each year occurring in the gutters. This is because comics authors are faced with choice of moment—that is, which specific incidents to include in an effort to inform the reader while leaving other, intermediate events up to interpretation. This format becomes especially important during periods of palpable emotional fallout, which takes form in the latter half of both aforementioned literary works.

Tillie Walden’s Spinning utilizes a format in which separate events are placed one after the other with little to no transitional panels. Rather, the gutters serve to fill in gaps where other authors might have provided the narrative with additional context. While unconventional, this method takes further advantage of comics’s fundamental advantage when dealing with trauma. By neglecting extraneous alphabetical transitions between graphic content, Walden forces the reader to align with her perspective and heightens the authenticity of her first-person account. This becomes evident after Walden opens up to her cello instructor about her previously experienced sexual assault. This moment establishes a noteworthy departure from Walden’s tendency to deal with trauma alone—even in the face of other supportive adults in her life. However, this sequence is immediately followed by one of Tillie’s skating events, in which she passes a skating examination after a period of repeated failure. It is notable that Walden’s displayed emotional maturity comes in the aftermath of a severe depressive episode, which Walden represents in a series of disjointed and isolated illustrations—each of which occupy an entire page. This disjointed period is marked also by obstacles in Walden’s skating life, most notably being the inability to pass her examination. By making the conscious choice of moment in which she passes, Walden utilizes a largely wordless sequent to describe emotional growth in the aftermath of trauma while allowing readers a level of autonomy with which to fill in additional details.

Likewise, David Small utilizes wordless panels in sequence to convey and elicit emotion within the reader. Most noteworthy is the sequence following David’s first therapy session, in which his therapist claims that David’s mother “doesn’t love” (Small, 131) him. Pivotal to the developing narrative, this statement unravels the pre-existing intertwining of maternal and nurturing qualities, thus creating a cataclysmic unraveling of David’s reality. This creates an interesting paradox, as David’s reality is fluid between imagination and factual recollection. At this point in the narrative, however, the two become indistinguishable from one another, with the images of daydreams and drawings shifting to page after page of water imagery. While these images can be assumed as symbolic, they act as tangible evidence of Small’s emotional distress, which draws readers further into his narrative and diminishes the line between both reality and imagination and author and caricature.

This erasure continually connects audiences with tangible representations of trauma, making graphic narratives especially suited for displaying how traumatic events shape perspective and visual memory. This phenomenon can be seen in the works of both David Small and Tillie Walden, whose works utilize the elements of comics to connect with caricatures of themselves, thus rejecting victimization through trauma in favor of emotional development. This trend can be seen across the genre, and is especially effective in conveying the thoughts of those otherwise silenced—particularly, women and gender nonconforming individuals. This is because comics offers a unique form of autonomy and voice, in which authors are given a wide degree of control over the reader’s perspective. These individuals are thus able to more authentically present themselves to a wide audience, creating a new and expanding platform from which to raise awareness for taboo issues. Based on the popularization of graphic narratives since the publication of Art Spiegelman’s Maus, this trend can be projected to continue, pointing to a more widespread understanding of the repercussions of trauma.

Works Cited


1. David’s therapist appears as the white rabbit. (Small, 251)
2. Tillie Walden cuts from event to event. (Walden, 351-352)