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A 21st Century British Comics Community that Ensures Gender Balance

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A 21st Century British Comics Community that Ensures Gender Balance

Nicola Streeten

The Graphic Memoir

- 1 In order to understand the popularity of autobiographical graphic memoirs today in North America and Britain, I begin by highlighting the influence of the publication in 1986 of *Maus* by North American writer and artist, Art Spiegelman (2003). This work, ‘...a shattering memoir of his father’s experiences in the Holocaust and a formal triumph of cartooning...made waves beyond the comics world as a book’ (Wolk 2007, p.8). It tells the story of Spiegelman’s parents, Vladek and Anja Spiegelman, from their first meeting in pre-war Poland to their survival of the death camps at Auschwitz and Dachau and their move to New York after the war. Part of the success and innovation, though also controversy of the book is the portrayal of the characters as animals. The Jews are mice, the Germans cats, the Poles pigs and the Americans dogs. It first appeared in 1972 in comic strip form in Spiegelman’s experimental comic RAW that he co-edited with his partner Françoise Mouly. It was later published in two volumes in 1986 and 1991. *Maus* has become a publishing phenomenon, selling over two million copies worldwide. Speaking to James Naughtie on BBC Radio 4’s *Bookclub*, Spiegelman referred to the difficulty he had convincing a publisher to produce it at that time. Publishers were concerned the depiction trivialised the seriousness of the subject matter, but the eventual success following publication paved the way for the acceptance of autobiographical comics about serious subject matters today (BBC Radio 4 2012).
- 2 However, Canadian comics scholar Bart Beaty (2009) considers Iranian-born Paris based Marjane Satrapi’s best selling graphic novel *Persepolis* (2007) as representing the full critical and financial success of autobiographical comics. Like *Maus*, it was published in

two volumes. *Persepolis 1*, 2004, is a memoir documenting Satrapi's childhood experience growing up in Iran during and after the 1979 Iranian revolution. *Persepolis 2*, 2005, depicts Satrapi's high school years in Austria and her return to Iran where she attended college, married, and later divorced before moving to France. It uses a simple line and black shading to present her story of Tehran in the Khomeini years – a story that is complex and that most Western readers do not know. She read *Maus* in 1995, which introduced her to the possibilities of the comic form to tell a story (Jamieson 2013). Published in a complete volume in 2007, it has sold over 1,500,000 copies worldwide. The hand animated film version of *Persepolis* won the 2007 Cannes Film Festival Jury Prize.

- 3 These successes were a result of the introduction of the form to a non-traditional comics reading public. The outcome of this was an association between comics and serious subjects (Beaty 2009, p. 231-2). The insistence of “truth” through the autobiographical voice applied to the comics form introduced it as an appealing platform for women’s personal stories. Since the phrase “The personal is political” from Carol Hanisch’s 1969 essay of the same title (Hanisch 1969), “the field of autobiography has become a central preoccupation and testing-ground for Feminism” (Cosslet et al 2000, p. 2). In the triumvirate of financially and critically successful graphic novels, the third was American cartoonist Alison Bechdel’s *Fun Home* (Bechdel 2006), documenting the autobiographical story of her sexual identity as a lesbian and her relationship with her father a closet homosexual. The appeal of *Fun Home* was particularly to the lesbian community that had included a loyal following of Bechdel’s regular comic strip, *Dykes to Watch Out For* since the 1980s. The work was also of interest to literature scholars, because of Bechdel’s literary references throughout *Fun Home*. Thus, her work invited a readership from two new areas.
- 4 Both in terms of the visual and the subject matter, these three works represented a change in direction from their provenance of underground comix. They challenged both the DIY aesthetic of the underground press of previous decades and the subject matter of sex, drugs and rock ‘n’ roll. Although both mainstream and alternative comics had dealt with adult subject matter, this was moving into a new area and a new definition of adult subject matter that dealt directly with everyday human experience. To publishers they symbolised a form that had the potential to be highly profitable. The legacy of these three works in the UK was the introduction of the autobiographical graphic novel, or graphic memoir, to a new and ever widening readership and to publishers that may not have previously considered comics as a lucrative form.
- 5 But in Britain a significant impact was created in 2001, when North American Chris Ware won *The Guardian First Book Award* with his autobiographical graphic novel, *Jimmy Corrigan, The Smartest Kid on Earth* (Ware 2001). The narrative in *Jimmy Corrigan* is of an abusive relationship between a man and his son. Ware’s artistic style draws heavily on graphic design and typography, and the clear line tradition of comics rather than the stylised crosshatched look of mainstream superhero comics. A “liberal quality daily” (Magforum 2016), *The Guardian*’s readership was much larger and more diverse than the traditional comics fan base creating a new audience for comics that included women.
- 6 The import of these comics works to Britain sparked a new readership, but also attracted the beginnings of a new comics community. In considering how and why this took place, I draw attention to the shared characteristic of the four works mentioned, or more specifically their creators. All five artists mentioned (Spiegelman, Mouly, Satrapi, Bechdel and Ware) were university educated. Their works reflect influences from fine art, design

and the humanities, as well as evidencing a professional approach. Arguably more innovative and influential than *Maus*, was Spiegelman and Mouly's production of *RAW* magazine. Emerging from the alternative or small press scene, it contrasted to the hand made aesthetic of the zine. It was a designed and high production quality anthology presenting experimental comics as art from North American, European and Japanese artists, and pushing the boundaries of the comics form. Spiegelman and Mouly's training was evident in their approach and introduced a distance from the mainstream comics industry. I argue the reliance of the mode of production on a DIY ethos gave the future publication and success of *Maus* an authenticity which validated the comic's commercial success. At the same time it implied a route to a similar level of financial success for alternative comics creators. It is this element that I propose injected the DIY ethos into the formation of a community in Britain. That is, the idea that you could publish your own work as a route to financial and critical success. The growth of the Internet and technological developments made communication global, effecting the production, distribution and consumption of cartoons and comics. Most importantly it enabled information exchange and a platform that nurtured virtual communities and reinforced physical ones.

The British Comics Community

- 7 Examples of alternative comics community activity in the early 2000s in the UK revolved around the sale of handmade zines and small press publications. Many of these publications incorporated an autobiographical subject matter. Activity also included a social element, such as musical events and poetry readings. Examples include *London Underground Comics* (LUC) set up in 2007 by comics creator and university student Oli Smith. He co-ran a stall at Camden Lock Market with other small press creators: Sean Azzopardi, Phil Spence, Oliver Lamden and Emma Price. They also ran one-day events until 2009. In 2008 LUC teamed up with Paul Gravett to co-host Comiket, a small press comics market at the Institute of Contemporary Art (ICA), London. Paul Gravett, writer, curator, critic, and leading British authority on comics co-directed *Comica* with Peter Stanbury, established in London in 2003 to host a series of annual events including a small press fair at the ICA in London. Comiket operated under the *Comica* umbrella. In 2008, another group of London based artists led by Jimi Gherkin and Peter Lally set up *Alternative Press*, "dedicated to encouraging creativity through self-publishing, zine-making, and beyond" (Alternative Press 2016). They ran an average of two events each year aimed at promoting the activity of the UK small press and zine activity and providing platforms for artists, zinesters and comix makers to show and sell their publications. Events also included talks, workshops, poetry readings and live drawings. In 2007 *Thought Bubble* was formed as a non-profit-making organization, becoming the biggest festival of its kind in the UK. Its aim was to provide "an annual celebration of sequential art in all its forms, including everything from superhero comics to independent and small-press artists and writers" (*Thought Bubble* 2016). Although women participated in this small press activity, it was mainly male led and/or attention to gender balance was not at this stage a consideration.
- 8 In 2003 Ladyfest Bristol and Manchester (2005) curated the first UK art exhibition of women comics-makers, entitled *The Cave of Comic Queens* including established small press

comics artists Lorna Miller, Lee Kennedy, Jeremy Dennis and Carol Swain. The Ladyfest Manchester festival programme, 2003 stated:

Comics are just so overlooked, as an art form, as a narrative form; and because they are completely male-dominated. Walk into any comic bookshop and look on the shelves and in the racks, how many women artists can you find? You'd never guess the wealth of talent there is in this country alone (Blase 2007).

- 9 Red Chidgey et al argue this activity offers insight into the conditions of production for feminist activity of the 2000s. The defining features of collaboration and often anonymously produced works seem to echo the approach of second wave feminist activity. However, feminist writers Jane Pilcher and Imelda Whelehan note an individualistic tone, which they viewed as a “radical suspicion of the politics of identity and a marked shift to “lifestyle politics” (Pilcher and Whelehan cited in Chidgey et al 2009, p.5). I agree that the individualistic tone was present, and that some creators used the grassroots platform as a springboard, or testing ground for publication for a wider audience. In such cases an aspiration became publication by larger publishers. In much zine activity by women there was a concentration on the more whimsical and humorous aspects of the everyday and the mundane, or “lifestyle politics”. For example, Birmingham based comic illustrator Liz Lunney began self-publishing zines in 2005 producing cartoons with lighthearted reflections on food and pets.
- 10 However, in many cases there was a mix of styles and topics and an interest in the community and social aspect in the mode of production were emphasised. For example in 2001, Selina Lock, a comics writer and creator, co-founded small publishing press, Factor Fiction with Jay Eales. In 2008, she edited the first in a series of anthologies, *The Girly Comic Book 1* “with no other guiding principle than having every strip feature a female lead” (Bruton 2009). The decision not to restrict the comic to work by women was because most submissions were from men. She therefore aimed to produce a “girl-centered, girl-positive comic written and illustrated by anyone” (Lock 2008). With a wide variety of topics and styles, the series included works by established cartoonists from the small press, such as Lee Kennedy, Jeremy Dennis and Jenny Linn-Cole. At the same time the anthologies introduced works by many younger artists such as Kate Brown, Asia Alfasi, Karen Rubins, Karrie Fransman and Laura Howell, who was the first female artist to have worked on *The Beano* comic. The series ran until 2011.
- 11 Selina Lock and Jay Eales were also active in running Caption Comics Festival established in Oxford in 1992, “...a unique, friendly event that brings comics creators, manga artists, comic-book readers and professionals together to mingle and discuss their work” (Caption Comics Festival 2016). Comics artist, Jeremy Dennis, also working under the name Jeremy Day was active in organizing Caption Comics Festival Comics as well as contributing to numerous small press publications. In 2003, she co-founded *Whores of Mensa* comics anthology with artists, Mardou, Lucy Sweet and later Ellen Lindner. They wanted to create, “a different kind of anthology comic, something that was a long way from the regular crush-them-in underground comic with its long contributor list, short story length and quick and dirty strips” (Day 2016). Mardou made two stipulations, “it must be sexy, and it must be clever” (Day 2016). In 2011, Ellen Lindner took over editorship of the anthology under the new name of *The Strumpet*. An extensive list of contributors to both versions of the anthology included: Sally-Anne Hickman, Cliodhna Lyons, Francesca Cassavetti, Patrice Aggs, Sarah McIntrye, Kripa Joshi, Tanya Meditzky, Hannah Berry, Julia Scheele, Megan Kelso, Sofia Niazi, Tanya Meditzky.

- 12 In 2009 Glasgow based comics creator Gill Hatcher founded *Team Girl Comic* a collective of Scottish based creators that met to talk about comics and to produce two comics anthologies a year. The social or community element was an important emphasis of the collective. The aim was:
- to showcase women and girls in the alternative comic scene, as well as to entertain!...strictly non-elitist and invite anyone female-identified in or from Scotland to contribute to the comic, whether they create art professionally or just fancy giving it a go (Team Girl Comic 2016).
- 13 In 2009 the London Zine Symposium hosted over 1,000 attendees and included talks from British academics Professor Roger Sabin and Professor Teal Triggs. Their research included zines and alternative press, published in 2001 in *Below Critical Radar: Fanzines and Alternative Comics From 1976 to Now* (Sabin and Triggs 2001). The use of the word “symposium” in the event’s title introduced an academic tone. However, the Zine Symposium was firmly located within a DIY and anarchist political ethos. Co-founder, London based artist and designer Edd Baldry had launched an online zine *Rancid News* in 2001 which became a print version. In 2005 this was reformed as *Last Hours*, an anti-authoritarian collective, publishing a fanzine and a series of books. The collective also founded the London Zine Symposium “celebrating DIY culture, zines and comics” (London Zine Symposium 2016). These ran annually until 2011.
- 14 The event was free to attend and depended on the Internet to disseminate information. It was hosted at *The Rag Factory*, a former clothing factory turned artists’ studios (including British artist Tracey Emin’s) in the East End of London. In 2009 it was being run as a charity offering rehearsal space to actors at low cost. The Zine Symposium was the first public event hosted there.
- 15 The previous year on 23 February 2008, the first symposium on the graphic novel took place in London as a *Graphic Novels’ Study Day* at Birkbeck College, University of London. This was organised by Dr Kasia Murawska Muthesius (Birkbeck, University of London) in association with Paul Gravett and *Comica*. The panel of invited speakers was an all male line up. On 6 June 2008 *Paraliterary Narratives Conference* took place at the University of Northampton. On 14 November 2008 The Victoria & Albert Museum hosted the first *One Day Comica Symposium* and announced its first Comic Illustration Residency at its newly-opened Sackler Centre for arts education, which was awarded to cartoonist Karen Rubins.
- 16 This sudden swell of academic activity in the UK gathered a small group of people who would be key in injecting and reinforcing a new approach into comics in the UK. They would also be at the heart of what by the end of the decade had become a burgeoning community. There were people gathered from a variety of backgrounds. Paul Gravett, already mentioned was at the centre of the connections. Ian Rakoff was the founder of the Victoria and Albert Museum comics archive and an expert on romance comics and Dr Mel Gibson was an academic at Northumbria University specialising in girls’ comics. Dan Berry, an animator and illustrator, had set up the first illustration for graphic novels BA course at Glyndŵr University that launched in 2008. Corinne Pearlman was a cartoonist who had contributed to *Sour Cream* and *Fanny* and set up *Comics Company* in the 1990s. She was working as the creative director at Myriad Editions publishing company that had begun with a specialism in political maps and was currently producing prose fiction. Myriad launched its graphic novel titles in 2006 with *Funny Weather* by cartoonist Kate Evans and in 2008 published cartoonist Woodrow Phoenix’s *Rumblestrip*. In 2011 their

third publication was my own work *Billy, Me & You*, the first graphic novel to receive a British Medical Association award in 2012.

Laydeez do Comics

- 17 It was through the academic connection that I attended these events, having enrolled on a practical master's degree in 2007 at the University of Lincoln with the intention of working on a graphic novel based on the experience of the death of my child. It was at the first graphic novel symposiums in the UK that I met and befriended artist Sarah Lightman who had begun a PhD at Glasgow University researching autobiographical comics. She was also working on *The Book of Sarah*, an ongoing drawn autobiographical work. In July 2009 we met at the Wellcome Collection in London to look at the exhibition of work by British artist, Bobby Baker (*Bobby Baker's Diary Drawings*, 2009). The exhibition was of loosely drawn line and watercolour drawings, which incorporated text. The drawings were based on Baker's personal experience of her depression. Works such as this we realised, was what "comics" could be. We decided to set up a group for the discussion of comics works with a loose remit that the focus would be on life narrative, the drama of the domestic and the everyday. Our decision was prompted by the lack of anything equivalent existing in the UK and the isolation of working on our own creative projects. Small comics groups did exist, but often they were held in pubs, which we felt historically symbolised male spaces. There were also practical drawing groups that were taking place, but what we were searching for was critical response, similar to the art school critical sessions model. However, we were keen to reshape this historically male aspect of the art school experience, and were keen to inject characteristics of the traditionally female. These, we felt were the small but important joys of the everyday, such as tea, cake, convivial conversation and laughter. The name reflected this. It symbolised light-heartedness and a reflective self-mockery of our middle class, older women status of ladies "doing lunch". The spelling of "Laydeez" was a nod to Trina Robbins' *Wimmins Commix* and their use of "grrrz" rather than to the later *Riot Grrrls*, since our ages dictated a closer alignment to the early American women comics artists of the 1970s. The main incentive was to meet socially and find out what other people were working on. The drawing and writing of the name, or "logo", as shown in Figure 1 was a caricature of the two of us. The low-tech drawing style signified that we were not an institution and that we were challenging the mainstream comic drawing styles. This included traditional male dominated superhero style as well as the polished art school aesthetic. It was the content of the works that was important to us, and the comics that we liked were often created by autodidacts. We also supported the democracy of a philosophy that anyone could make comics and attend our meetings.



Figure 1: Original logo for *Laydeez do Comics*, 2009 (Source: Streeten 2009)

- 18 It was in this way that we co-founded *Laydeez do Comics*, “like a combination between a book club and a series of TED talks” (Davis 2013). Our meetings were held monthly at The Rag Factory, a venue introduced to us by the earlier Zine Symposium event. This was the first graphic novel salon to have existed; women led but not women only, it has welcomed everyone, strictly ensuring a gender balance in the invited guests. Modelled on a book group format to begin with, it quickly developed to become a platform for invited guests to present their works. Advertised online to a public audience it has always been free of charge to attend, although a £1 donation is asked for the cake. It first attracted around 20 people and escalated to around 100 each month by the end of the decade (*Laydeez do Comics* 2016), establishing itself as a hub of the small British comics community. The emphasis has been on providing a space to test new works and ideas, where emerging artists can present their work alongside more established practitioners. Guests are not restricted to comics creators but have included academics, filmmakers, writers, animators, artists and publishers. The audience too, is not restricted to comics enthusiasts and has been an important component of the activity. The aim has been to make everyone feel comfortable and welcome and to introduce the comics form to people who may be new to it. To this end, the serving of cake is an important addition, hand baked by Lightman. Another feature we introduced was “the question” that we have begun each meeting with. Everyone in the audience is invited to tell us their name, what they do and to respond to a question. An example of a question is, “have you ever won anything?”
- 19 It has been a grassroots activity based on goodwill with an interest in stressing the importance of social interaction. Yet it has been promoted widely and globally through the Internet and social media. We have ensured each event has been documented and archived online through guest bloggers’ drawn recordings that have been posted on the blog. It is activity that has added to the professionalisation and academisation of the comic. Both Lightman and myself were brought to the comics form through academia; the social activity has become an essential element of both my own and Lightman’s academic research, and approach to academia. As Lightman noted, “creating in real life what you

may be studying” (Lightman 2010). It soon became a series of events that national and international publishers, critics, festival organisers and academics from the industry have frequented to discover new works, so enhancing the industry. At the time of writing, *Laydeez do Comics* has spurred branches in Leeds, Bristol, Glasgow, Birmingham, Dublin, Chicago, San Francisco and Israel with pop ups in Brighton and New York.

Graphic Medicine

- 20 Another pivotal grass roots activity that has escalated the comics community in the UK, supported the feminist message and been an injection from outside the comics industry is *Graphic Medicine*. Ian Williams, a general practitioner based in North Wales who then studied fine art at postgraduate level and completed a Masters Degree in Medical Humanities, initiated *Graphic Medicine* in 2007. He had begun a personal blog to record the comics works he was becoming aware of that conveyed the personal experiences and emotions of patients. He had begun to build a following and noticed evidence of a growing interest in the subject and in the potential of the application of comics within healthcare. In the late 1990s, American physicians such as Rachel Naomi Remen and Rita Charon had been publishing and lecturing on the benefits of patient narratives within medical practice, establishing the term “Narrative Medicine”. Charon stated: “Sick people need physicians who can understand their diseases, treat their medical problems, and accompany them through their illnesses.” (Charon R 2001, p. 286). The first Master’s program in Narrative Medicine was established at Columbia University Medical Centre in 2009 (Columbia University Medical Centre Program in Narrative Medicine College of Physicians and Surgeons 2016). Familiar with Narrative Medicine, Williams adopted the term “Graphic Medicine” to differentiate the focus. Dr Michael Green and Dr Susan Squier From Penn State University were both using comics as teaching aids within the context of medical humanities and approached Williams in 2009. Williams proposed that he lead on a *Graphic Medicine* Conference in London. Organised with fellow postgraduate students Columba Quigley, who was studying for a Masters degree at Kings College, London and Dr Maria Vaccarella, Research Fellow at the Centre for the Humanities and Health, King’s College, London. The conference took place in June 2010 at the University of London, receiving financial support from the Wellcome Trust. Williams was then approached by MK Czerwiec, RN, MA, a North American trained nurse and comics creator going by the name of “Comics Nurse” who had completed a Masters degree in Medical Humanities and Bioethics at Northwestern Feinberg Medical School, where she then served as Artist in Residence. Following the conference a *Graphic Medicine* committee was established with international university partners, including Dr Michael Green, Dr Susan Squiers and Dr Kimberly Myers from Penn State University and Dr Shelley Wall, from the University of Toronto (*Graphic Medicine* 2016). Czerwiec also joined the committee and organised the second conference in Chicago. From 2012 Czerwiec also ran the Chicago branch of *Laydeez do Comics*. The *Graphic Medicine* conferences have been held annually since 2010. What has been unique about the conferences is the interdisciplinary mix of presentations and attendees. They included participants who were creators, academics and people working in healthcare professions as well as patients. As with *Laydeez do Comics*, the activity was started by an individual who was a creator and entered comics through higher education at postgraduate level. *Graphic Medicine* professionalised comics, widening the reach and possibilities, becoming global through the website and social media. Yet it began as a

grassroots activity. In 2015, *Graphic Medicine* established a line of publications in association with Penn State Press.

- 21 A number of women creators attended *Laydeez do Comics* and were inspired to tell their stories in comics form. Through *Laydeez do Comics* some were introduced to publisher Myriad Editions, who at the time of writing have expanded their graphic novel list to twenty-one graphic novel titles. With a mission to support emerging authors, they have earned a reputation of publishing experimental and innovative works. Penn State University Press will publish American editions of some of these titles. To conclude my paper, I will present a brief overview of seven works by women that have been published in the UK, to demonstrate the variety of styles and subject matters appearing.
- 22 In *Becoming, Unbecoming* (Una 2016), comics artist Una tells an autobiographically based story of being slut shamed as a teenager during the 1970s. Set in Leeds, in the North of England, the narrative presents the context of the Peter Sutcliffe attacks. Dubbed by the press as the “Yorkshire Ripper”, Peter Sutcliffe sexually attacked and murdered thirteen women across Yorkshire between 1975 and 1980. Mythologised by the media the attacks introduced a climate of fear for women. Una draws on feminist texts to reflect on the impact on women and society at the time.



Figure 2: A page from *Becoming, Unbecoming* (Source: Una 2016, p.77)

- 23 Henny Beaumont’s graphic memoir, *Hole in the Heart* (2016) tells the story of Beaumont’s experience of giving birth to and raising a child with Down’s Syndrome. Her honest account of living with a child who has special needs, speaks to society’s response to disability and in particular to attitudes within the medical profession in the UK.



Figure 3: An image from *Hole in the Heart* (Source: Beaumont 2016, p.28)

- 24 *Red Rosa* is a graphic biography of the German socialist revolutionary Rosa Luxemburg written and drawn by cartoonist Kate Evans (2015). Luxemburg overcame physical infirmity and the prejudice she faced as a Jew to become an active socialist revolutionary. Her philosophy enriched every aspect of her life, from friendships and sexual intimacies to her love of science, nature and art.



Figure 4: An image from *Red Rosa* (Source: Evans 2015)



Figure 5: Image from *The Inflation Woman* (Source: Ball 2015)

- 25 Rachael Ball's graphic novel *The Inflation Woman* (2015) is a poetic, surreal and humorous response to her experiences with breast cancer.



Figure 6: Image from (Source: Talbot 2012, p.83)

- 26 Writer Mary Talbot's part biography and part autobiographical *Dotter of her Father's Eyes* (2012) interweaves two father-daughter relationships, that of her own and that of Lucia Joyce, daughter of legendary novelist James Joyce. Cartoonist Bryan Talbot's drawings move the reader between gritty postwar Britain and the swinging Paris of the 20s and 30s. This was the first graphic novel to receive a 2012 Costa Biography Award.

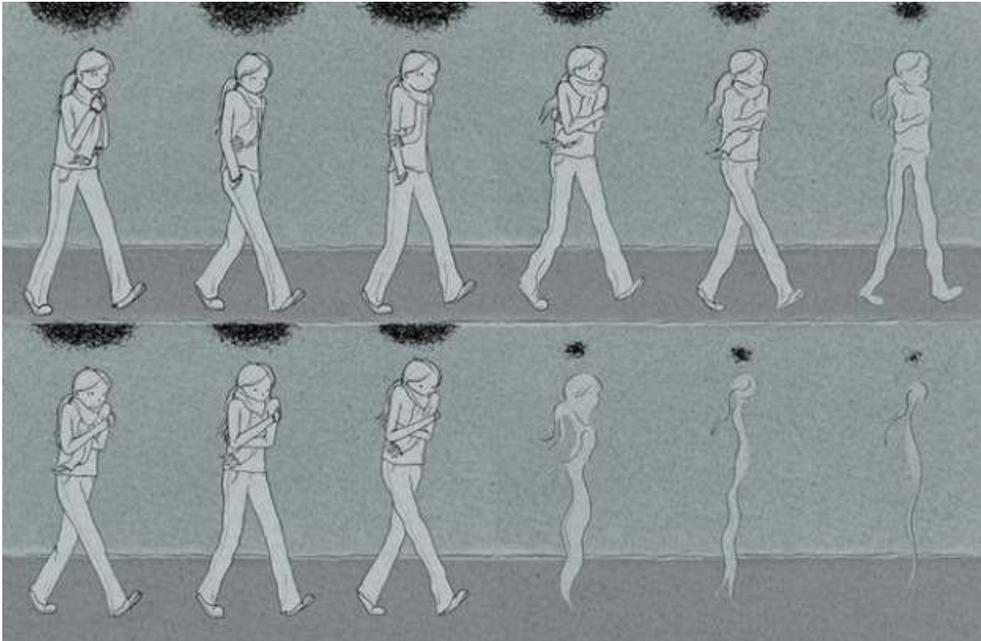


Figure 7: Image from *Lighter than my Shadow* (Source: Green 2013, pp.124-5)

- 27 Katie Green's graphic memoir *Lighter than my Shadow* (2013) narrates her experience of living with anorexia nervosa. Using a beautiful drawing style she develops the story to convey the trauma of sexual abuse she experienced from a therapist she saw for treatment.

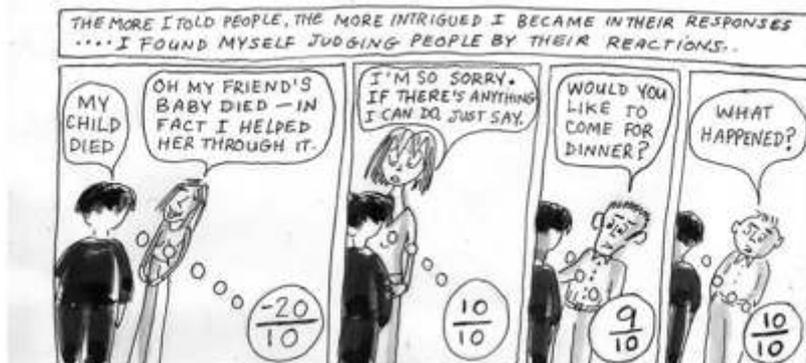


Figure 8: Image from *Billy, Me & You* (Source: Streeten 2011, p.13)

- 28 My own graphic memoir *Billy, Me & You* (2011) is based on my experience of grief following the death of my two-year-old son. Using humour, I explore the taboos surrounding death and the social discomfort around bereavement.
- 29 This is a small selection of a greater number of new works appearing recently in book form in the UK. The ones listed have received critical acclaim. Yet, the international landscape for women in comics continues to be male dominated. This was evidenced most strikingly in 2016 at the third biggest comics festival in the world, The Angoulême International Comics Festival. In a list of 30 prize nominees for the prestigious Grand Prix d'Angoulême, there were no women included. The prize is a lifetime achievement award at the festival, and the winner is named president of the following year's event. In Angoulême's 43-year history, just one woman – the French artist, Florence Cestac has won (Chrisafis 2016).

- 30 In response, a number of grassroots women led comics groups have combined forces to ensure an international presence of women comics artists at the 2017 Festival. These include *Ladies of the Night Anthology* (USA), *Laydeez do Comics* (UK); *Comic Book Slumber Party* (UK) and *FEMSKT* (Finland). Organised events will be part of the 2017 festival as well as an event at the École Européenne Supérieure de l'Image, Angoulême. Such activity reflects a global expansion of the community building I have presented as taking place in the UK. As with the emergence of *Laydeez do Comics* and *Graphic Medicine*, the proceedings have been initiated by independent creators gathering together with a shared motivation of establishing gender balance within comics.

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ABSTRACTS

In this paper I show how since 2000 there has been a surge of community building activity within the alternative comics “world” in the UK. This, I argue, has positively impacted the position of women as comics creators and as contributors to the comics industry. I maintain that the reason for the surge has been an increasing regard for gender balance in the activity. I focus on the work of *Laydeez do Comics* and *Graphic Medicine* to support this. Another cause I propose has been the focus on the autobiographical and/or everyday, domestic subject matter, which has attracted readers and creators from a variety of backgrounds, beyond a traditional comics readership.

I begin by considering the influence of works by Art Spiegelman, Marjane Satrapi, Alison Bechdel and Chris Ware in the popularity of the “graphic novel”, more specifically the “graphic memoir” in the UK. I continue by outlining the activity within the comics community in the early 2000s to establish the context in which *Laydeez do Comics* and *Graphic Medicine* emerged.

Dans cet article, je montre comment il y a eu, depuis 2000, une forte augmentation de l'activité de construction d'une communauté féminine et féministe au sein du monde de la bande dessinée alternative au Royaume-Uni. Cette nouvelle donne a un impact positif sur la situation des femmes en tant que créatrices de bandes dessinées et en tant que contributrices à l'industrie de la bande dessinée. Une raison de ce changement tient à une volonté de rééquilibrage des genres au sein de la bande dessinée alternative ; pour cela, je m'appuie notamment sur le travail de *Laydeez do Comics*. Une autre piste que j'explore afin d'expliquer ce phénomène est la place prise par l'autobiographique et la vie quotidienne, deux sujets qui attirent les lecteurs et les créateurs au-delà des milieux habituels de la bande dessinée traditionnelle.

L'article s'ouvre sur une discussion de l'influence des œuvres d'Art Spiegelman, Marjane Satrapi, Alison Bechdel et Chris Ware dans la popularité du « roman graphique », plus particulièrement de « l'autobiographie graphique » au Royaume-Uni. Il se poursuit par la description de l'activité au sein de la communauté des auteurs de bande dessinée au début des années 2000 pour établir le contexte dans lequel *Laydeez do Comics* et *Graphic Medicine* ont émergé.

INDEX

Mots-clés: histoire de la bande dessinée, bandes dessinées britanniques, femmes et bande dessinée, bandes dessinées féministes, communautés, Laydeez do Comics, Graphic Medicine, romans graphiques, genre et bande dessinée

Keywords: comics history, British comics, women's comics, feminist comics, comics communities, Laydeez do Comics, Graphic Medicine, graphic novels, gender and comics

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