



Conjoined Approach

Introducing Elegant Refinement
to the World of Graphic Novels



A Design Thesis Presented
by Isabel Juliet Humphrey
BFA Graphic Design, 2025

Conjoined Approach

Introducing Elegant Refinement
to the World of Graphic Novels



Isabel Juliet Humphrey | 2025

A thesis presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
degree of Bachelor of Fine Arts in Graphic Design at the Corcoran
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in Washington, District of Columbia.



Thank you to the Corcoran community, my classmates, and my professor, Marc Choi, for their support and guidance. I'm especially grateful to my parents for their encouragement throughout my time at college.

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Isabel Humphrey at the MoMA
with an original Lichtenstein
New York City, 2023



I like to pretend
that my art
has nothing to
do with me.

Roy Lichtenstein

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Part One

The Graphic Novel

Thesis Argument and Preliminary Research

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Abstract

Recognizing the graphic novel as an insightful tool for emotional preservation and cultural reflection, this thesis investigates strategies to introduce beauty and refinement to a medium notorious for exemplifying rough and careless illustrations. By implementing a visually modern, sophisticated design style that will strengthen the perception of the medium as prominent in the literary field, I aim to create a graphic novel that will be recognized for its depth and insight, and not as a typically humorous and lighthearted media.

The “conjoined approach” is researching both comic culture and elegance in design to figure out how to bring them together. At the same time, the process for creating the graphic novel is a conjoined approach of using both design softwares and traditional freehand sketching.

This thesis explores the intersection of fine art with digital design by merging traditional illustration techniques with many contemporary technologies to transform communication and visual development by adding human emotion.

By transforming memories and experiences into a clean and visually compelling format, graphic novels deepen understanding of how personal history can behave as cultural reflection on the human condition.



Introduction

This book is divided into three sections, each serving a critical role in the development, exploration, and final presentation of the design thesis. The first section establishes the foundation of the thesis argument through a combination of academic writing and in-depth research on the graphic novel as a sophisticated narrative form. This section not only introduces the central question—how graphic novels can be used to convey complex emotional and social experiences—but also will contextualize the discussion within a broader literary and visual tradition. Through an analysis of several influential works within the medium, including both mainstream and independent titles, this first section draws connections between visual storytelling, personal narrative, and unique capabilities of sequential art. This section reflects on how graphic novels blend text and image to communicate layered meaning, and how this hybridity allows for emotional nuance and experimentation with form. The goal of this section is to define the thesis both conceptually and intellectually, grounding it in both theory and existing practice.

The second section shifts from theory to hands-on design experimentation. This next portion of the book is dedicated to exploring visual strategies for expressing the thesis argument. It is composed of three separate but thematically linked design explorations. Part 2A focuses on page structure and content flow in graphic novels. It includes a zine that synthesizes research findings and presents the thesis proposition in a format that mirrors the subject of study. Through this project, principles of pacing, panel layout, and narrative rhythm are tested and closely observed. Part 2B takes a broader historical approach, delving into the cultural evolution of comics and their shifting role in society. This project includes a poster and a museum pamphlet which was designed for a hypothetical exhibition on the history of graphic novels. It explores how graphic storytelling has been used over time to reflect political, social, and personal narratives, and how its reception has changed from pulp entertainment to a recognized literary form. Through visual design, this project

aims to educate and engage viewers on the deep transformative journey of the medium. Part 2C is dedicated to developing a personal illustration style and workflow, moving from pencil sketches to ink and digital color. This project serves as a process exploration and prepares the blueprint for the final thesis project. This section allowed for the exploration of tools, materials, and techniques while helping to establish a visual voice that aligns with the emotional tone of the thesis content.

The third and final section of the book centers on the development of the thesis project: *Wake Up and Smell the Roses*, an original graphic memoir. This project is a personal narrative that explores themes of love, betrayal, identity, family, and emotional recovery. It serves as a living example of the thesis argument, using the visual language of traditional comics mixed with beauty and refinement to document and process real-life experiences. This final section includes work in progress images to demonstrate the full progression from concept to final execution. In addition to the creative process work, this section includes documentation of the preparations for the memoir’s debut in a professional exhibition setting (NEXT 2025.) This includes layout plans, an installation mockup, and other design collateral for promotion. The exhibition functions as both a culmination of the thesis journey and a real-world application of its core ideas—inviting an audience to engage with the work on an emotional, intellectual, and aesthetic level. Together, all three of these unique sections work in unison to argue for the graphic novel as a powerful but underutilized form for visual storytelling and cultural commentary.

Graphic Novels, Graphic Design

Graphic Design

Graphic design is one the most professional practices for creatives due to the value of its use in communication. Architecture is also among the most professional creative disciplines that merges creative practice with corporate relevance, but it serves a different purpose in the world. Graphic design bridges aesthetics and functionality for the purpose of solving problems visually while conveying messages that could resonate emotionally and intellectually. Unlike fine arts, which emphasizes emotion and self-expression, or marketing, which often prioritizes selling, graphic design strikes a balance between the two, drawing on ideas from both fields. Its foundation lies in semiotics, psychology, and storytelling, which allows designers to create work that is not only visually engaging but also meaningful within specific cultural and social contexts. Graphic design uses typography, layout, color, and shape language to create visual storytelling and clarify complex ideas. The field continually evolves, reflecting advances in technology, shifts in societal values, and the transformation of all communication through design. Graphic design has become especially relevant in the 2010s - 2020s with the mass shift to screen based interactions. The later part of this project includes a platform created for users to read graphic novels via a mobile device. Viewing the same content as a publication versus as an application highlights the contrast between the mediums, and the evolution of graphic design consumption.

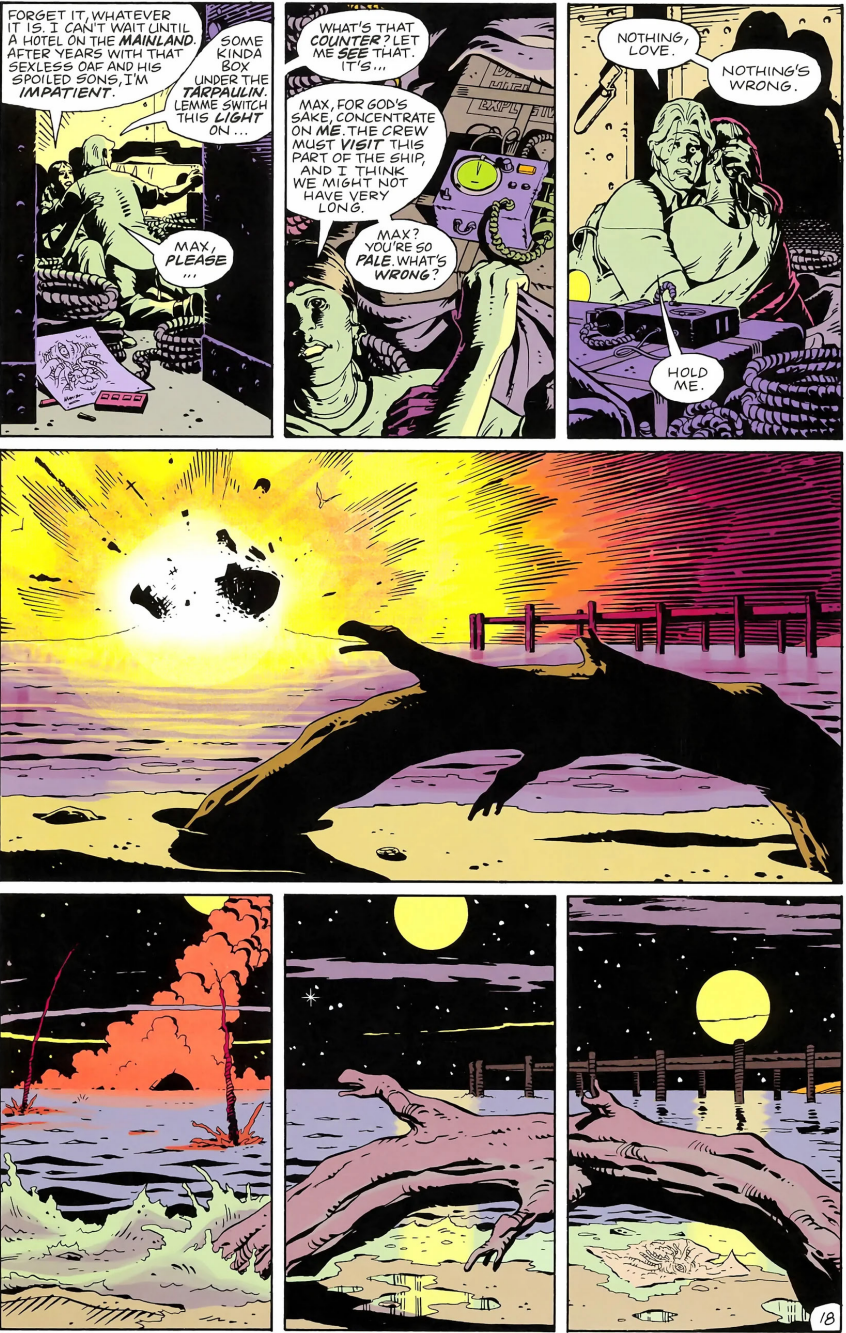
Without graphic design, we could not read, nor could we access the digital environment, and we all would literally see the world differently.

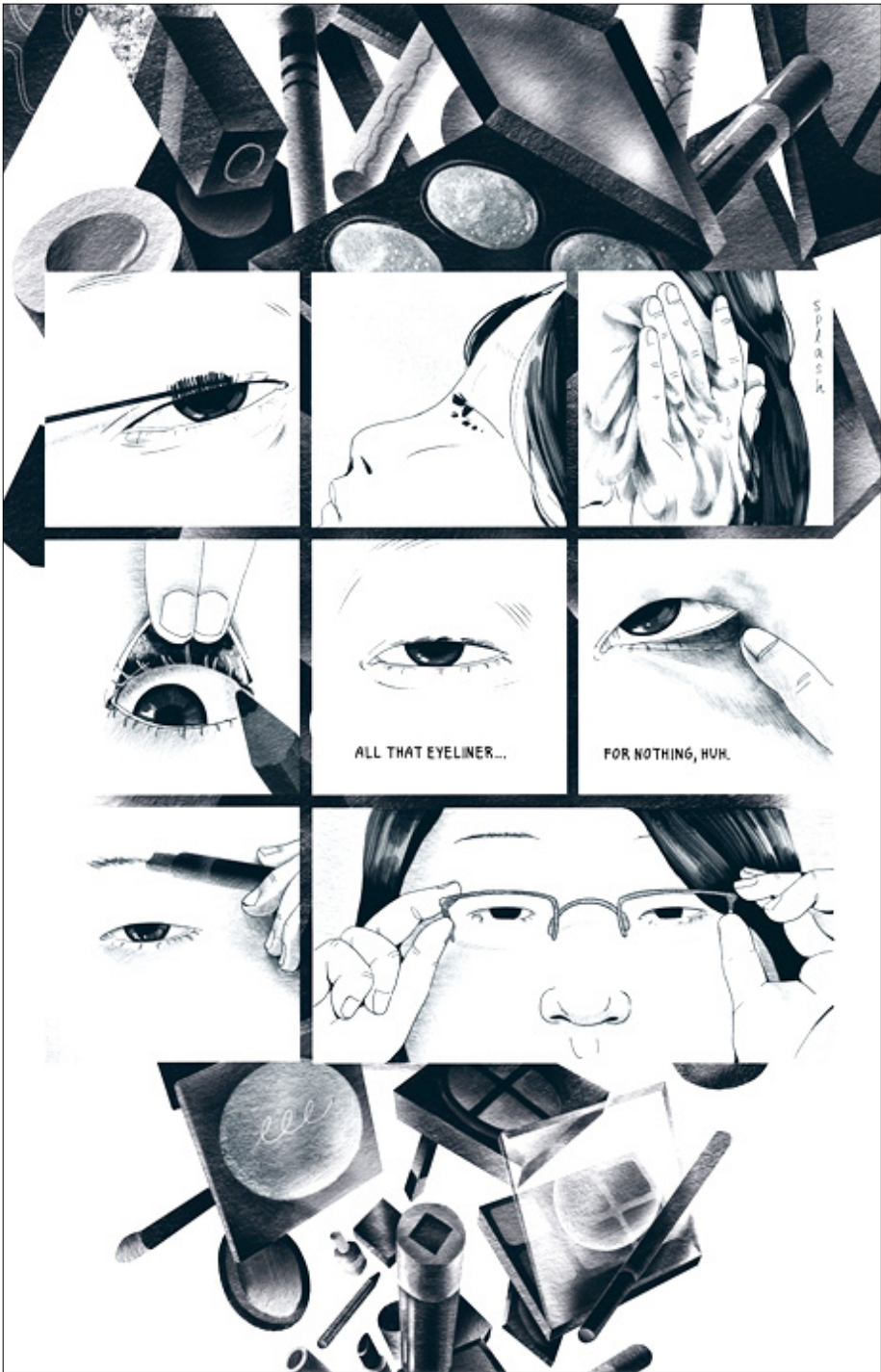
Thesis Connection to Design

This thesis calls attention to the graphic novel as a prime example of how graphic design can awaken and transform stories through the use of visuals. The graphic novel stands to represent how graphic design can be used as a tool for preservation, documenting experience for the purpose of cultural reflection. The giveaway elements of graphic design simply are typography, color, and illustration. Graphic novels include these elements and can, historically, fall under the umbrella of the publication industry. Graphic novels push the tension between illustration and typography. When these elements are used in sequential storytelling, they act as tools for self-reflection and societal commentary. By addressing themes such as gender norms, relationships, family dynamics, and psychological challenges, the graphic novel format can challenge traditional notions of both autobiography and “comic” culture.

The work of writer Alan Moore, artist Dave Gibbons, and colorist John Higgins in the popular graphic novel *Watchmen* showcases how design elements like simplified page structure and eclectic colors can enhance storytelling. It creates a level of drama and pacing that other storytelling methods cannot achieve. Similarly, the thoughtful, introspective approach of Deb JJ Lee in *In Limbo* demonstrates how illustration and personal narrative can be paired to demonstrate emotional and cultural themes. Investigating the origins of human stereotypes through illustration is one way graphic novels can put forth profound cultural reflection and societal critique. The way male vs. female characters are illustrated reflects interpretations of male/female gender differences. The goal of this thesis is to inspire more designers to consider this medium as a strategy to protest societal norms. Students and designers alike can benefit from visual storytelling techniques, particularly with relation to layout and pacing for communicating

sequence. These skills are transferable across many design applications, such as UX design, in which guiding the user through the interpretation of content at a steady and even pace is heavily considered.





A Tool for Preservation

Graphic novels can be used for preservation, to perform cultural reflection, and to capture the past vividly. They are one of the few tools available to humans that can document and preserve memories, making them immortal. Created visuals inherently contain cultural reflections on the subject they engage, making these thoughts and ideas permanent. Through writing, illustration, and storytelling, graphic novels defeat the impossible task of reliving the past and offer the opportunity to live another's experience.

Visual Over Verbal

Graphic novels are the best tool for documenting memories and preserving the meaning in our lives, first because visual communication is more powerful and efficient than verbal communication. Visual communication can be raw and candid, while verbal communication is typically filtered based on social context. *Critical Survey of Graphic Novels: Theme, History, and Technique* explains, "...visual components result in a degree of subjectivity, even when the author's intention is to present an objective narrative... readers, even practiced critical readers, are more willing to accept the truth of images." (201) Visual communication also surpasses verbal communication in its ability to convey complex ideas quickly and effectively. Although speech tends to be the primary mode of communication, it does not offer the deeper comprehension that visual language can. This became evident in my childhood as I recognized visuals as more raw, honest, and comprehensible than words people told me. Within my family dynamic, it sometimes made sense for me to stay quiet, and so I learned to interpret the world more sharply through what I saw. To exercise this concept, I found the best way to show my thoughts and ideas was through art and design. In-person communication often involves complex layers such as social norms and personal reputations. Designers, however, have the unique ability to bypass these barriers, stepping outside of themselves to consider multiple perspectives and create communication that is both detailed and self-explanatory. While my audible voice can be soft, the impact of my thoughts is more strongly carried through in my work, which is bold, detailed, and carries little to no mystery. Being someone more skilled at visual rather than verbal communication often presented challenges, given the reliance on speech for identifying oneself. However, the idea of using art and design to bring forward all raw ideas and memories and the potential to connect them to thousands of readers for years to come reminds me why I'm proud to be a visual communicator. By

preserving my ideas, identity, and work in a physical, visual novel, I can harness the benefits of visual communication and reveal the honesty I could not with verbal communication.

Illustration Holds Vital Information

The important element that propels graphic novels above written novels is illustration. The use of illustration and typography combined with strong storytelling skills accomplishes emotional preservation. Illustration contains body language and facial expressions, which are relevant details in analyzing a conversation between two characters. *The Arrival* by Shaun Tan is a fantastic example of a graphic novel that relies heavily on body language and facial expressions to tell its story. As a wordless novel, *The Arrival* conveys complex emotions purely through facial expressions. The absence of text emphasizes comprehension gained through visuals. Tan allows readers to feel the protagonist's sense of disorientation and adaptation as he immigrates to an unfamiliar environment, through subtle changes in posture and expression. Tan's work proves the reliance on facial expressions and body language as cues. These cues are often more candid indicators of emotion than words can be, and they change our interpretation of what's being said. These elements must be present to understand the interactions between fictional characters just as they are in real conversations.

Illustration also expresses mood and energy, or lack thereof, through color palettes. *Daytripper* by Fábio Moon and Gabriel Bá changes color palettes based on the protagonist's mood. The novel follows the life of an obituary writer who explores themes of mortality and meaning through his work. Readers can observe bright, warm colors when depicting moments of joy and hope, contrasting with cooler, somber hues during more reflective or melancholy scenes. Alternatively, *The Best We Could Do* (Abrams Comic Arts, 2017) by Thi Bui uses a muted, neutral palette with occasional splashes of dark ink washes, which reflects the

quiet, melancholic tone of the story and the bleakness of the rural landscape. As the protagonist escapes from Vietnam with her family in the 1970s, the restrained use of color accentuates the story's introspective nature and highlights the characters' emotional struggles. The limited palette brings an intense focus on the loneliness and longing permeating the narrative.

Even beyond illustration, the words in graphic novels, particularly those depicting speech, are more direct indicators of human voices and sounds, with the presence of onomatopoeias, shapes of speech bubbles, and altering type sizes and weights. Different illustration styles align with different outlooks on life, with multiple methods of establishing subjective beauty and emotion. These skills can increase the impact of recorded memories. By documenting thoughts, moments, and memories, they are vividly captured and revived. The importance of the discussed topics cannot fade, since they're always accessible in the work.







Memory in Art
and Design

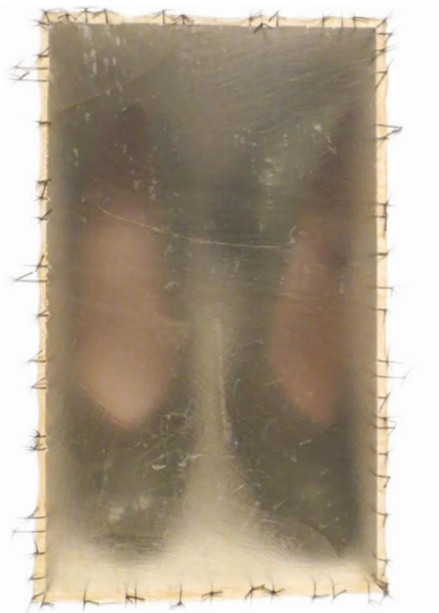
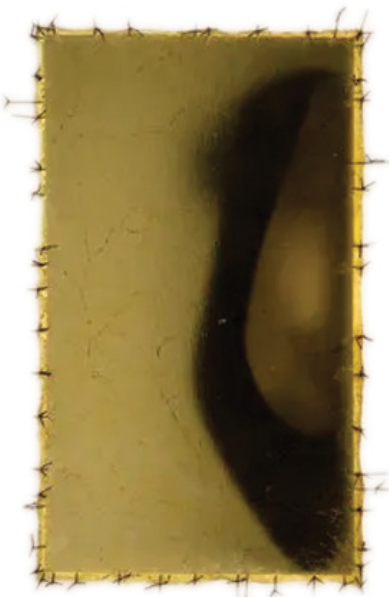
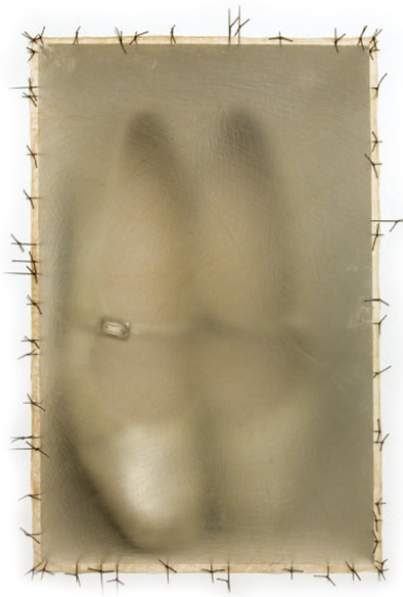
The act of documenting memories has a similar effect as illustration, notably because illustration also naturally contains opinions on the subject matter it represents. Memories are biased with emotion and are not exact records of past events. Memories distort reality, as they include judgment on what happened along with what actually did happen.

In Doris Salcedo’s installation *Atrabiliorious*, the Colombian artist portrays a pair of shoes trapped under dirty glass, to symbolize the victims who vanished under a repressive government. Her art acts as a somber testament to those who have disappeared in Colombia’s turbulent history, employing her creations to bear witness to historical events and delve into the collective memory and trauma of her nation. The art bears witness to history but does not show history, as the shoes remain while the victims who wore them remain absent. The shoes are also faded under the glass. Reality becomes unclear as it’s flooded with emotion. Salcedo proves an experience in history can never be remembered exactly as it happened, since it’s viewed through the lens of the present. Sigmund Freud, the 18th-century founder of psychoanalysis, published a theory called “nachtraglichkeit,” which proposed that a person dealing with a traumatic event represses it, and then retrieves the latent memory later to process it. The retrieved memory is not purely about the past but is reconstructed according to what the person is experiencing in the present. This is precisely what is accomplished with memoirs as graphic novels. The author does not simply recount their experience neutrally, but rather walks through the emotions associated with each detail. *The Limits of Perspective* from *Critical Survey of Graphic Novels: History, Theme, and Technique* acknowledges, “such visual documentation of the past, used primarily to make sense of that past, distinguishes the nonfiction graphic novel from other works of nonfiction, providing the reader with a richer, more complex depiction of the relevant social or historical contexts.” (200) The “richer” and “more complex depiction” is made possible with the sketches and unconventional typography readers rely on to understand the story.

The emotional experience of these stories gives us more accurate insight into the life of certain societies than a neutral, descriptive report would. The essay also discusses *Fun Home* and *Persepolis* as examples of using graphic novels as memoirs, and as a means to reflect on personal, societal, and social issues. *Fun Home* tells a personal tale of discovering sexuality with a father who is privately homosexual and a sexual predator, while *Persepolis* gives readers a first-hand perspective of growing up in the Iranian Revolution. The social and historical relevance of these topics is a large part of what has propelled the popularity of these specific graphic novels. In digging deeper beyond their topic, these artists’ works are also impactful because they’re told in first-person.

Both also have a rough, casual sketching style of illustration and exclude color. This creates a non-intimidating environment for the reader and alludes to the raw emotions surrounding the social and historical themes. These artists have proven how the act of documenting one’s thoughts and memories helps empower experience with immortal impact.





Doris Salcedo, *Atrabiliarios*. 1992-1997
Mixed media installation; animal fiber,
shoes, surgical thread in niches

HOME FOR CHRISTMAS, I FOUND DAD'S DELIGHT ABOUT ULYSSES A BIT GALLING.

HERE, TAKE THIS. IT'S THE COPY I USED IN COLLEGE.

CAN I WRITE IN IT?

HERE'S DUBLINERS, TOO. THE FIRST THREE STORIES ARE LIKE DRAFTS FROM PORTRAIT.

I REALIZED I HAD MISSED IT, HOWEVER VICARIOUS IT MAY HAVE BEEN.

IN A BURST OF TENDERNESS, I ENCOURAGED HIM FURTHER.

AND THE DEAD. YOU HAVE TO READ THE DEAD. OR AT THE VERY LEAST, THE LAST PARAGRAPH.

OKAY.

SO...WHAT SHOULD I READ THIS WEEKEND?

HMM. LET ME THINK.

ELATED

THAT ELABORATE BACKSTORY TO THE ODYSSEY, THE TROJAN WAR, IS OFTEN BLAMED ON HELEN OF TROY.

BUT SHE COULDN'T HAVE RUN OFF WITH PARIS IF HE'D NEVER SHOWN UP.

I WONDERED IF YOU KNEW WHAT YOU WERE DOING WHEN YOU GAVE ME THAT COLETTE BOOK.

WHAT?

OH.

I DIDN'T, REALLY.

IT WAS JUST A GUESS.

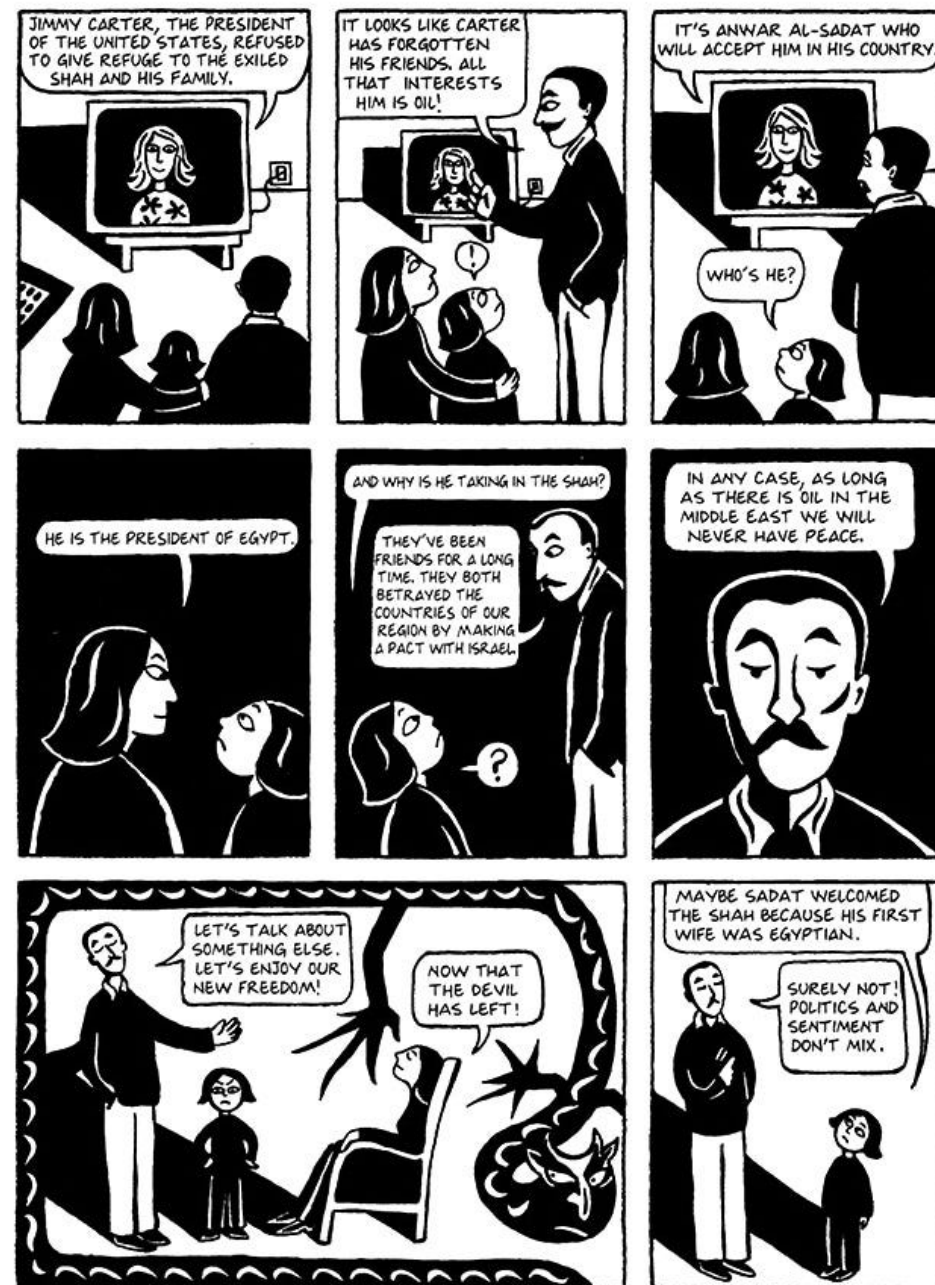
I KEPT STILL, LIKE HE WAS A SPLENDID DEER I DIDN'T WANT TO STARTLE.

I GUESS THERE WAS SOME KIND OF... IDENTIFICATION.

MY FIRST EXPERIENCE WAS WHEN I WAS FOURTEEN.

NORRIS JOHNSON. HE HELPED OUT AT THE FARM AND THE FUN HOME.

HE WAS REAL WELL-BUILT, WITH BLACK, WAVY HAIR. IT WAS...NICE.



Visual Over Verbal

Visual communication conveys more accurate and detailed accounts of experience than verbal communication, as proven by psychological and education related research. This fact explains why graphic novels are the most effective storytelling method. In terms of psychology, comprehending information through images is quicker than listening to typical spoken communication.

Science has proven readers remember and recognize images more vividly than words. Based on data collected by Elena V Kazakowa in *The Psychology Behind Data Visualization Techniques*, recently published by *Medium*, "Cognition is handled by the cerebral cortex, which is a tool of reasoning; it is a sophisticated tool, but it hasn't yet been polished by evolution and therefore it's pretty slow. It requires more effort to process information. Raw visual information is processed by the thalamus, a much older part of the brain...*it takes only a few hundred milliseconds to process visual stimuli (much faster than we process text or numbers).*" Kazakowa calls this "pre-attentive processing." It allows complex ideas to be communicated visually more efficiently than through speech. Processing information through speech unfolds in the mind at a slower time frame, and even then most of the interpretation involves visualization. This rapid processing enables visuals to make an immediate, lasting impression, while verbal communication is often more easily forgotten or misinterpreted.

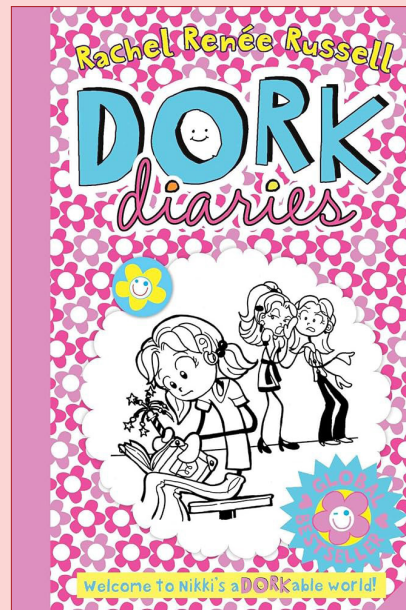
Furthermore, visual communication is more refined and polished, allowing for a higher chance of accuracy and detail in the intended message. Visual media, like graphic novels, undergo multiple rounds of editing, color adjustments, and layout design to achieve clarity and impact. Each element — color, composition, line weight, and shape — is meticulously chosen to evoke specific emotions or convey particular themes. In a graphic novel, the artist may refine a character's facial expression multiple times to capture exactly the right mood, ensuring that the message is clear without a single word. Verbal communication is much more casual, and unless scripted it's always a first draft of what's trying to be said. It can lead to spontaneous phrasing that can miss the clarity and precision achieved through thoughtful, crafted visuals. In high schools across the U.S., the possibility of studying *Shakespeare's plays as graphic novels* to make the text more understandable is discussed by Sarah

McNicol from Manchester Metropolitan University in *Releasing the Potential of Shakespearean Comic Book Adaptations in the Classroom: A Case Study of Romeo and Juliet*. McNicol references "narrative polyphony" as reasoning for the impact of visual communication. "[It] occurs when, for example, the picture shows the character's outward behavior, while a thought bubble conveys his true feelings. To comprehend the comic, the reader needs to take account of both. This process of presenting the multiple messages simultaneously would seem to be well suited to the interpretation of complex, layered texts such as Shakespeare." (McNicol 137.) The need for graphic novels is called upon in this case to enhance understanding of the story, more so than reading the play or watching a performance would. Visual communication is better for storytelling than verbal communication because the story has clear and refined visuals that contain vital information, which may not come through otherwise.

Take for example the graphic novel *Habibi* by Craig Thompson. The novel is set in a fictional Islamic landscape, with visually rich and symbolic artwork inspired by Islamic art and calligraphy. Thompson's detailed panels create a layered, sensory experience that emphasizes the story's emotional and spiritual depth, using symbols and patterns to convey ideas that are best experienced visually rather than described verbally. In viewing artwork from *Habibi*, consider how difficult it would be to describe the scene depicted. Even if it was described verbally, the exact image portrayed with the associated details may not come to mind. The concepts of pre-attentive processing, narrative polyphony, and Thompson's work as an example illustrate how visual communication triumphs over verbal communication in telling immersive and powerfully emotional stories.



Design Inspiration



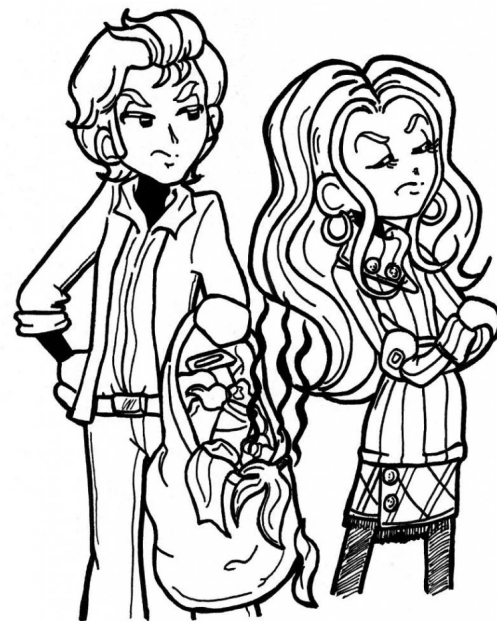
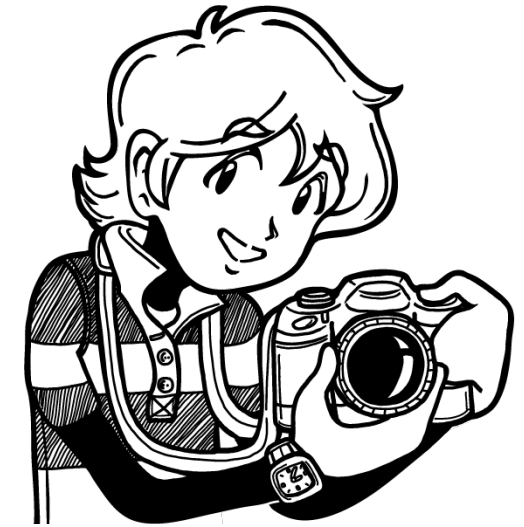
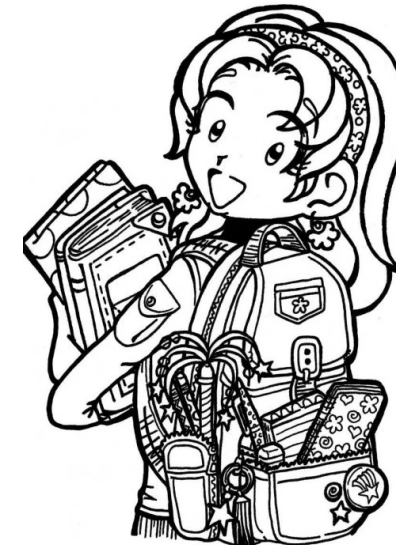
Russell, Rachel Renée. *Dork Diaries: Tales from a Not-So-Fabulous Life*. Aladdin, 2009.

1. Dork Diaries

The New York Times bestselling *Dork Diaries* series follows Nikki Maxwell as she chronicles her life through text and art—her move to a new school, her battles with queen bee MacKenzie, and her zany adventures with her BFFs Chloe and Zoey by her side.”

— Simon and Schuster

The *Dork Diaries* were quite an influential series to me and my friends when I was in the 4th grade. Author Rachel Renée Russell’s illustrations inspired me to draw with black ink pens. Her illustration style was unique in the way she drew the character’s eyes, and combined a cartoon style with intricate detail. Thanks to *Dork Diaries*, I abandoned the smudgy graphite of pencil illustration and embraced the satisfying strokes of black pens.





Lichtenstein, Roy. *M-Maybe*. 1965. Oil and synthetic polymer on canvas. Museum Ludwig, Cologne.

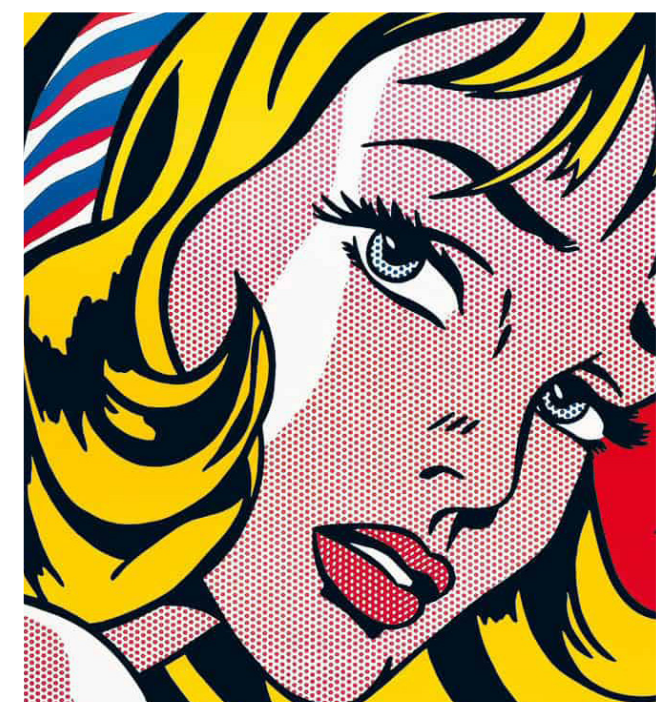
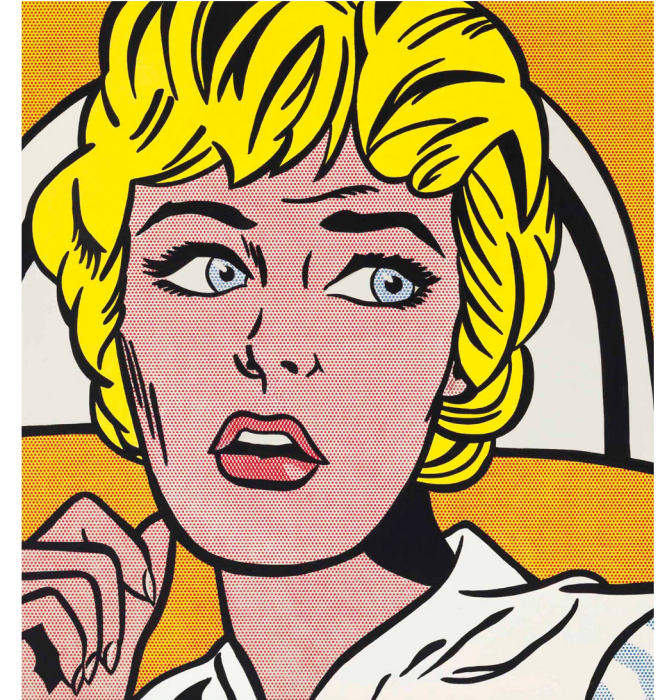
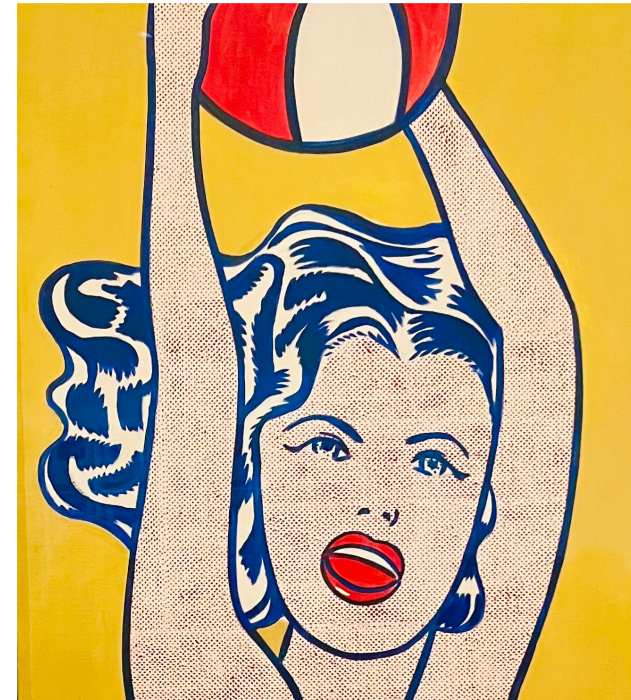
2. Roy Lichtenstein

An essential figure of the Pop Art movement and beyond, Roy Lichtenstein grounded his profoundly inventive career in imitation—beginning by borrowing images from comic books and advertisements in the early 1960s, and eventually encompassing those of every-day objects, artistic styles, and art history itself.”

— Museum of Modern Art, NYC

The first time I saw Lichtenstein’s work was at a production of *Jersey Boys* on Broadway. My father is deeply influenced by the music he grew up with in the 1960s, and he took me to see the show when I was 14. During one of the musical numbers, large portraits of exquisite cartoon women were lowered behind the actors playing Franki Valli and the Four Seasons, to capture the time period on stage. I felt moved by the portraits due to the mockery of female stereotypes. They are a brilliant way to comment on gender expectations.

1. Lichtenstein, Roy. *Girl with Ball*. 1961. Oil and synthetic polymer paint on canvas. Museum of Modern Art, New York.
2. Roy Lichtenstein, *Nurse*, 1964, oil and magna on canvas, private collection.
3. Roy Lichtenstein, *This Must Be the Place*, 1965, oil and magna on canvas, private collection.
4. Roy Lichtenstein, *The Girl with Hair Ribbon*, 1965, oil and magna on canvas, Museum of Contemporary Art, Tokyo.



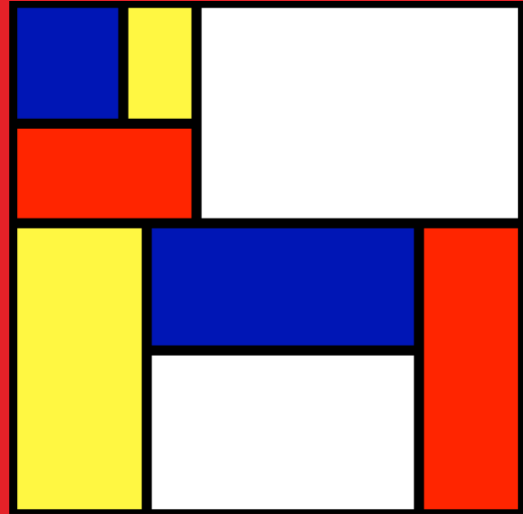
3. The Bauhaus Modernism Movement

Modernism refers to the early 20th-century era when design was thought to be capable of igniting social improvements in society. Modernism also reflected the rejection of history and conservative values, and sought to express innovation and experimentation. Distinctive features of “modern design” are defined by exquisite simplicity, functionality, and clean lines that would create a sense of order. The belief was for form to follow function, and emphasize practicality and efficiency rather than mere decoration or meaningless beauty. Minimalist aesthetics were used to prioritize negative space and simplicity with a focus on geometric shapes and asymmetry.

One of the first and most prominent schools of art and design that can be credited with aiding the modern design movement down its path was the Bauhaus, a German school that operated from 1919 to 1923. Bauhaus ran its curriculum based on a series of principles, with an emphasis on technology, simplicity, and little reliance on materials. A principle of modernism was the creation and use of a straight forward, simplified aesthetic. This was a shift from the excessive ornamentation that defined the renaissance era, and the old blackletter typography used during the Middle Ages in Western Europe.

De Stijl was a design movement identified as modernism, which had originated in Holland, the Netherlands. Here, artists and designers formed collaborative collectives, and each group had issued a manifesto describing their purpose in how they planned to use the power of art and design. *Composition with Red, Blue, and Yellow* (1930) by French artist Mondrian is a prime example of De Stijl. His goal was to create a universal, harmonious painting, producing an art form that would appeal to all cultures of life. The simplicity of the shapes and colors allows the composition to be understood and form connections with a wide range of viewers. He did not include a diagonal, considering even this small change to be too radical.

There is a similarity to Lichtenstein’s 1960s Pop Art and 1920s De Stijl design as both use a primary color palette of red, yellow, and blue. These three colors were used for different reasons in modernism vs. pop art. De Stijl used primary colors to emphasize the idea of stripping design down to



Mondrian, Piet. *Composition with Red, Blue, and Yellow*. 1930. Oil on canvas, 39.5 × 39.5 cm. Kunsthau Zürich, Zürich.

necessities and creating universal harmony. Pop Art was influenced by mass media and popular culture, which often included the primary color palette in various media and comic books for a visually striking effect.

In my visual experimentation, I borrowed some key elements of modernism, namely the clean lines apparent in the grid layout of the panels, as they allow for a simplified comprehension of content flow. Additionally, I use the color red. The color is used frequently in my illustrations due to its ties to the themes and emotions of the story, but also as a striking visual point. Instead of using all three primary colors for an eye catching effect, I use one, allowing the red to shine next to muted, low opacity shades of hair or skin. The clear message of red comes through in a stronger manner with this technique, and the simplicity of using one strong color instead of three make for a more recognizable brand identity of the story. Moments of the design pop, but the entire page does not.



Rietveld, Gerrit. *Rietveld Schröder House*. 1924. Utrecht, Netherlands.

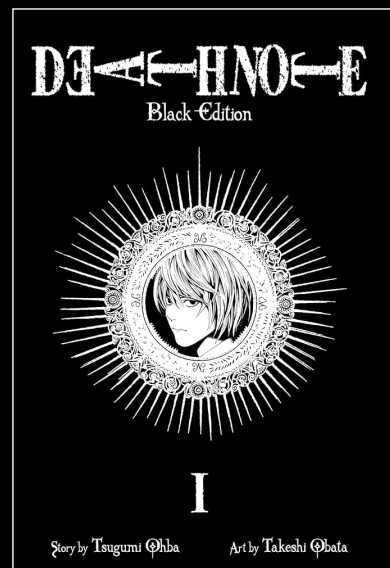
4. Japanese Manga

Graphic novels have become popular in Japan and the U.S. thanks to several mangas such as *Attack on Titan*, *Death Note*, and *Tokyo Ghoul*. The modern manga style emerged in the late 19th century, though its roots can be traced back to earlier Japanese art traditions. In Japan, the term “manga” refers to both comics and cartooning, whereas outside of Japan, it refers to graphic novels originally published there.

Manga often told stories involving supernatural plot lines that reflected contemporary social issues. *Attack on Titan* tells the story of a society forced to unite when facing attacks from murderous giants called titans. *Death Note* tells the story of a cynical high school student who finds a mysterious notebook dropped from another realm, which he uses to kill criminals he sees on the news by writing their names in the notebook. *Tokyo Ghoul* follows a boy who is forced to receive organ transplants from a ghoul following an accident, and navigates his new life being half human and half cannibalistic monster.

The use of dramatic shading and light/shadow contrasts is often cited as a key element in creating manga’s dark and suspenseful atmosphere. Some fans find the art style to be both detailed and concise, avoiding unnecessary clutter and focusing on conveying the story effectively. Some readers may be turned off by the mature and dark themes of the manga, which could include violence, gore, and morally ambiguous characters.

Perhaps the dark subjects reflected in these manga are related to the fact that Japan has the highest suicide rate of any other country, due to a society that prioritizes work and minimizes social relationships. Japanese artists have developed manga to cope with personal issues and escape from reality with fantastical stories. Although these stories are fiction and do not qualify as memoirs, they have had a profound impact on cultural reflection all over the world.



Ohba, Tsugumi, and Takeshi Obata. *Death Note, Vol. 1: Boredom*. San Francisco: VIZ Media, 2005.



Ohba, Tsugumi, and Takeshi Obata. *Death Note, Volume 1: Boredom*. San Francisco: VIZ Media, 2005.



Ishida, Sui. *Tokyo Ghoul, Volume 1*. Translated by Joe Yamazaki. San Francisco: VIZ Media, 2015.

Thematic Inspiration

1. Illusion vs. Reality

The question of whether a thought or circumstance is parallel with illusion or reality is an important theme I explore through visual narrative. The theme can be explored more effectively in a visual medium, as the difference in illustration of the character’s illusions and their reality can be easily compared and contrasted. The line between the two can also be visually blurred, as the illusions of the character are seen by the audience through the character’s perspective, provoking them to question what is real and what is not.

Using a thought bubble above a character and drawing an image within that thought bubble is an obvious depiction of illusion vs. reality. The reality is everything happening outside the thought bubble, while the illusion, dream, or memory is contained within the thought bubble. However there are less obvious strategies to achieve this distinction, such as having entire pages dedicated purely to imagination. The ability of graphic novels to visually document the difference in one’s reality vs. illusions is a unique and strong benefit of the medium.

2. Family Dynamics

Family dynamics have a deep impact on a person’s relationships. The people we choose to associate with may subconsciously be an attempt to seek the familiar comforts of home, or conversely, to rebel against the family’s rules. The way in which interpersonal conflict is handled may be mirrored from a parent to a child, or the child may develop personality traits that work to compliment the parent’s. For example, an uptight, strict parent may cause a child to develop an easy-going personality and seek casual comforts. Or, a family member with a gregarious personality may result in a child who is more quiet as they recognize there isn’t enough room in the house for two loud personalities. Relationship conflicts with people outside the family often results from individuals having

different ideas on what is acceptable behavior and what is not, based on how they were raised. In graphic novels, relationships can be depicted strongly in a way that words alone cannot portray. Body language and facial emotion are portrayed through illustration. In reading a written novel or listening to a friend tell a story, the observer cannot feel the uncomfortable tension hanging between two characters as they can in an illustration.

3. Contrast of Male/Female Needs

Another theme I explore is the difference between men’s and women’s needs in romantic relationships. The company Digital Romance Inc. had released a program titled *Make Him Worship You*, targeted to heterosexual women. I came across it once, and saw the program contained information on male psychology, arguing that most conflicts in heterosexual relationships are a result of men and women treating each other like they experience life the same way. It explained this is problematic as men and women have a different set of needs, tied to anthropological history. These conflicting needs create imbalance and tension. I noticed a connection between *Make Him Worship You* and Roy Lichtenstein’s paintings. Both expressed the negative impact of gender stereotypes and gender roles in society. The characters I illustrate embed these concepts, which become tested in the interactions between them. Visually, interpersonal dynamics can be illustrated in the placement and composition of the characters.

These themes are all connected, as they are by-products of complicated interpersonal relationships. They also are all components of the idea of cultural reflection, as they all are results of broader personal, social, and societal issues.

Interview with Deb JJ Lee, author of *In Limbo*



"Briefly, *In Limbo* follows protagonist Deborah (Jung-Jin), or Deb, through her four years of high school as she tries to love and understand herself, embrace art as her vocation, and get out from under her family's expectations, especially the relentless needling of her very driven, at times abusive, mother."
- Kinder Comics

Isabel: Deb! Hi there, it's so nice to meet you. I'm Isabel. Thank you so much for taking the time to meet with me today. How was LA, and France?

Deb: Yeah, no France was great but stressful, I went to nine different cities. I didn't really have time to explore each city, we would just do a quick dinner in some of them cause the events we were doing took most of the day in each one.

Isabel: Were you doing some kind of tour?

Deb: Yes, that's exactly what it was, I was doing book signings. Mass amounts of them every day.

Isabel: That's exciting to hear that your work took you all the way to France.

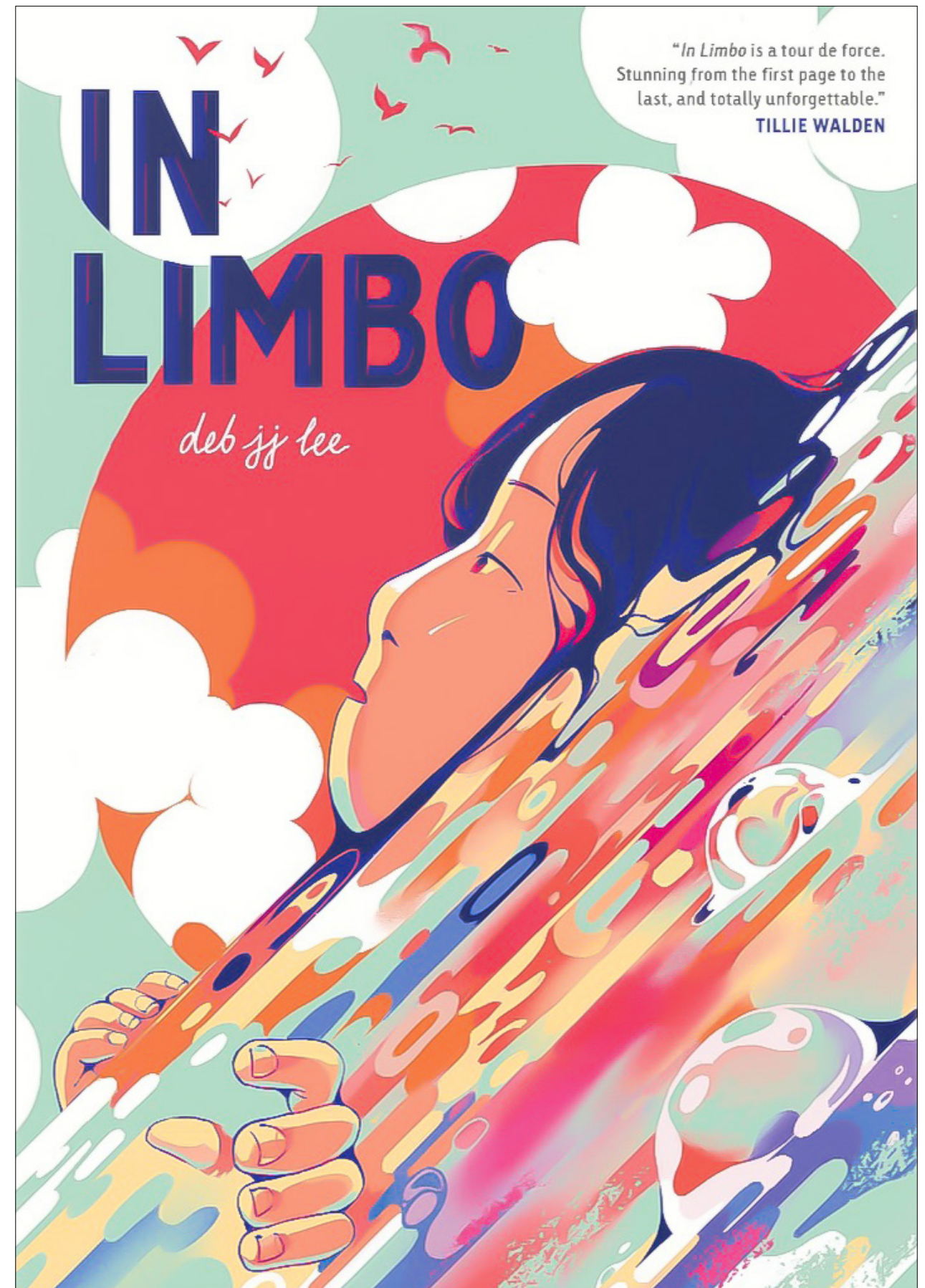
Deb: Yeah, it is!

Isabel: I have your book here with me today...

Deb: Oh my god! So cool. Nice copy.

Isabel: Yes! I will be asking you mostly about this project since I spent the most time with this one. But when I ask about your illustrations, I'm also basing my questions on your work for *The Other Side of Tomorrow* where you illustrated for another author, and those movie posters you've been making that are so elaborate.

Deb: Okay. You know, working on *The Other Side of Tomorrow* was different from working on *In Limbo* because it wasn't my story. I only took the job because I was 23, and I thought



“The industry is thriving in France. It’s because France interacted a lot with Japan throughout history, Japan and France would trade comics with one another for economic reasons. So, in France, people *actually respect you* for being a comic artist.”

it might help me advance in the industry because I was new. Now, I think I’d only agree to illustrate for another author if it was someone I knew or if it was an artist I really respected.

Isabel: I can see how that might be different. I came across *In Limbo* earlier this semester because I was at the section in my university’s library dedicated to graphic memoirs, and when I went there to check out a few books that I thought had the same impact I wanted my novel to have, I identified *In Limbo* as one that was ...most in tune with what I’m trying to do. And from there, I discovered you, your work, and your story. I related to many of the themes you put forth here. Although I can’t relate to the cultural barriers you experienced as a Korean in America, I had a similar relationship with my mom, who often pushed me hard and valued my academic success over my mental health. So that’s why it really resonated.

Deb: I see. Yeah, that was a big theme for *In Limbo*.

Isabel: Yes. So, would you like to get into the questions?

Deb: Sure!

Isabel: For my first couple of questions, I’d like to ask about your process. Writing, illustrating, and publishing a graphic novel seems like a huge task.

Deb: Yeah, no, it really is.

Isabel: I know different authors approach it differently, where some start with writing, then storyboarding, then drawing, or some go the other way around. I think it’s a cereal-before milk kind of thing ...

Deb: Hahaha, yes, like some people do it with drawing first and some with writing first. I get that.

Isabel: Yup. So, what were your steps, from beginning to end?

Deb: Yeah, so it’s definitely a *huge* task. When I started *In Limbo*, it was originally 500 pages. I’m not going to do that to anyone, so I had to trim it. I worked with my editor, who really helped me to trim it down and take out some of the parts that maybe weren’t as necessary. And I did my storyboarding on paper. Maybe that’s not the best

way to do it, but yes, I did all the storyboarding by just drawing on paper with pencils. When I started working with my editor, I originally had a synopsis that I had sent around, so I based the storyboard on the synopsis. For writing it, I created most of the side characters as someone who represented a group of people I interacted with. Their purpose was to show the types of interactions I had with that group.

Isabel: That kind of reminds me of the movie *Bombshell*, where Margot Robbie’s character Kayla represented twenty different women who were harassed at Fox News. But there was no real “Kayla.”

Deb: That’s what I meant. Crafting those characters involved the most work because I had to put more thought into what they were representing. And after drawing on paper, I would render the storyboard.

Isabel: When you say render, could you please tell me which software you used to do that?

Deb: I use Procreate. Yeah, I make every single project from Procreate. I actually deleted all my Adobe subscriptions this past year because I can do everything I need to in Procreate. I drew everything in there, like every single frame, including the lens.

Isabel: Okay. Did you draw them larger and scale them down to fit in the panel boxes?

Deb: Um, no, I just drew everything right there. I would have a new file for each page, so I would have a file that was called page five, for example. Also, I did all the writing after the illustrations. So, I actually illustrated the whole book before I put type in. It was more difficult to do the writing than the drawings, and I really only put in text where it was completely necessary.

Isabel: Yes, I can see how that would be hard. It’s a whole other skill set.

Deb: Yes, it’s a different department altogether, and I have more background in illustration than writing.

Isabel: It also sounds like you were working with an editor for most of the process. It wasn’t that you completed the book first and then searched for an editor?

Deb: Yes, that’s right. I had the synopsis written, which connected me to the editor.

Isabel: Okay nice. So, with your book here, I’ve noticed you’re skilled at creating different textures, such as the texture in your hair, the wood on the walls, the effect of light streaming through the windows, or the ripples in the water. Overall, your drawings appear successfully blended. Could you please talk about how you created those textures and the blending effects in your illustrations?

Deb: Blending? I didn’t really do any blending. Maybe you’re talking about the fact that I use a lot of shades, cause that’s mainly how I created the texture. I work with a wide range of shades in Procreate, so I was able to adjust those shades based on where the light was coming from in the illustration. I love drawing with pencils, so I mimicked the effect of graphite from when I used to draw with pencils and graphite in high school.

Isabel: I’m actually the opposite, I prefer drawing with pens. Black ink pens.

Deb: Oh yes, I like those too.

Isabel: I love using them because they are so sharp and satisfying.

Deb: I agree, they really are satisfying. That’s why it sucks that all comics are mostly made digitally now.

Isabel: Speaking of, what do you think about the future of graphic novels and the comic industry in terms of the media used to access them? Now, some artists publish a chapter a week and have subscribers who read the chapters online as they come out. Would you ever consider doing something like that?

Deb: That’s a crazy schedule! I know readers are more on electronics than they are reading physical books, so it makes sense, but that’s a little unreasonable to expect a chapter a week. Publishing the book online and finding ways to format it for mobile is definitely an option. Like, just posting a super long PDF. In France, they do that, and they have more reasonable expectations for subscription-based publishing than a chapter a week.

Isabel: Really? Is that part of the reason why you had your book tour in France?

Deb: Kind of. The industry is extremely popular and thriving in France. It’s because France interacted a lot with Japan throughout history, you



Lee, Deb JJ. *In Limbo*. New York: First Seond, 2023



know? Japan and France would trade comics with one another, like for economic reasons. So, in France, people actually respect you for being a comic artist.

Isabel: Wow, I really didn’t know that. I knew they were popular in Japan because of manga, but I didn’t consider France. I guess that’s a whole other branch of research for me to look into.

Deb: Comics and graphic novels are so ingrained in French culture. It’s to the point where everyone in France has at least one graphic novel in their home.

Isabel: That’s interesting, I wouldn’t say it’s like that in the U.S. Do you think you’ll do more work in France in the future?

Deb: Yeah. I will. There’s so many benefits to living there.

Isabel: My concern would be the language barrier. Do you speak French?

Deb: Yes, actually my French is even better than my Korean.

Isabel: Looks like you’re set, then. I really wanted to ask how you’ve been creating your illustrations, so that’s been incredibly helpful. Now, I’m going to move into some more conceptual questions.

Deb: Sure! Sounds good.

Isabel: My thesis argument is that graphic novels are a way of preserving personal experiences and transforming them into cultural reflections. This is why they’re an important tool for understanding history and critiquing social norms. As a graphic memoir that puts personal struggle forward, *In Limbo* really echoes this concept.

Deb: Yeah, I would say so, too.

Isabel: I’m wondering, is your reason for making this book related to the idea of creating meaning from what you’ve been through and reflecting on this period of your life? Why did you choose to create it?

Deb: I think I always wanted to do a book like this, and the storyline kind of came up later on. At the end of the book, I talk about it being a year-long therapy session. I had plans to publish my artwork, and I also wanted to do a project on my story, so I decided to combine

those aspirations into one project, which ended up being *In Limbo*.

Isabel: I see that. So, would you agree with this idea of using the book to capture a period of your life and solidly the meaning of it? Like with this book, I’m able to able to access your story easily through the medium. You see what I mean?

Deb: Yeah, I think a little bit. It’s not the whole “era” in there because not everything I wrote is completely accurate to what happened. How do I say this... It’s more of a combination of what happened and my interpretation of what happened. Almost all the conversations are based on ones that happened, but the dialogue is changed a bit. I would say I captured the gist of what happened, but a lot of scenes in there are almost entirely made up.

Isabel: In a way, your book is almost more truthful this way because it’s your interpretation of your experience as shown through the novel. Through its illustration, structure, and everything else.

Deb: Yeah, I guess I could see it that way. That’s an interesting way to look at it.

Isabel: Cool. The graphic novel I’m working on is also a personal story that has some heavy subject matter. How did you overcome any concerns you had about being vulnerable in this project?

Deb: Right, well, I guess I was maybe a little concerned about people who knew me reading it, the ones who went to my school. I was a little concerned that they’d think I had something against them. With my friend Quinn, I told her I was going to write this, and that was our last conversation after our falling out in the book. I’ve had some other people who were friends with her tell me she treated them the same way..

Isabel: Wow. That’s interesting. So I have a follow-up question to that: do you believe it was worth it?

Deb: Yeah, I do, even though it might have been a little weird for the real people it’s based on, it was worth it to reach so many other people. It’s kind of just a small sacrifice I had to make.

Isabel: I agree. Personally, I believe it’s worth taking any and all judgment to reach people. Seems like the pros outweighed the cons, and it was worth the risk.

Deb: Right!

Isabel: Thanks, Deb. I know you said you only have thirty minutes, and we’ve now passed thirty minutes. To wrap up here, you can ask me questions if you have any, or if not, maybe provide any advice you’d give yourself if you could go back to when you first started creating your book.

Deb: Yeah, you should send it to me when you finish up with it. I’d love to see it.

Isabel: Oh, absolutely. I’d love to stay in touch.

Deb: Sure, we can.

Isabel: I think I should try to learn Procreate. Would you say it’s hard to learn?

Deb: Not really. Although I might be biased because I’ve been working with it for seven years. Maybe initially it’s unfamiliar, but you could get the hang of it.

Isabel: I’ll have to try it out as soon as I get an apple pencil.

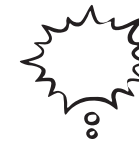
Deb: Sounds good! You also don’t need an Apple pencil, any pencil that can connect to the iPad will work.

Isabel: Good tip. Alright, well, thank you so much for taking the time to meet with me today. This has been so helpful. I just want to say congratulations. I was so impressed by your book. It’s great that you’re touring it in France, and it’s been a huge inspiration for me.

Deb: Thanks, Isabel.

Isabel: Bye Deb! Thanks again.





Part Two

Comic Culture

Visual Experimentation and Comic History

2B - Structuring Sequential Art

- 62. Analyzing Flow
- 64. Types of Panel Layouts
- 66. Initial Experiments
- 70. Booklet: *Visual Strategies for Graphic Novels*

2B - History of the Medium

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- 82. Iconic Characters Throughout Comic History
- 86. Brand Identity Inspired by Comic History
- 90. Exhibit: *Panels POP!*

2C - Illustration Process

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- 98. Facial Expressions
- 115. Installation: *The Process of Illustrating a Memoir*

Analyzing Flow

Visual strategies for graphic novels involve guiding the reader through content in a manner that is and clear and intuitive, while emphasizing or downplaying certain sequences. Keeping interest with variations in illustration and panel sizes while maintaining a consistent flow is the key to maintaining the interest of readers.

Neil Cohn from the Center for Research in Language at the University of California San Diego published an interesting essay on how readers interpret the sequential art of graphic novels based on their page layout and panel organization. The ideas from his essay *Navigating Comics: an Empirical and Theoretical Approach to Strategies of Reading Comic Page Layouts* cannot only be applied to comics, but to any piece of digital or print media in which content is interpreted sequentially.

Cohn points out that content and layout are “ultimately independent structures,” but they greatly influence one another, forming a harmonious or catastrophic relationship depending on how they interact.

A viewer goes through a series of steps when interacting with print or digital media. They begin by taking in the entire page, screen, spread, poster (and so on) and gain an understanding of the content’s feel. They notice if it’s colorful, detailed, dense, or airy. Next they find an “entry point,” where they start reading and observing each piece of the content individually. For graphic novels and most publications, the entry point is the top left corner of the spread. Where the entry point is located and where the viewer goes from there should never be unplanned. A designer’s job is to curate the intended sequence like the page has an invisible, predetermined GPS.

The most common path viewers take when viewing content is the Z path. In the English language, viewers read from left to right, which inputs a bias that all visual media should be interpreted from left to right. This is why designers structure their content with this in mind, generally organizing content from left to right. Reading a graphic novel page follows the Z path, identical to reading a book without illustrations. This is another reason why the graphic novel experience is an enhanced version of reading classic literature.

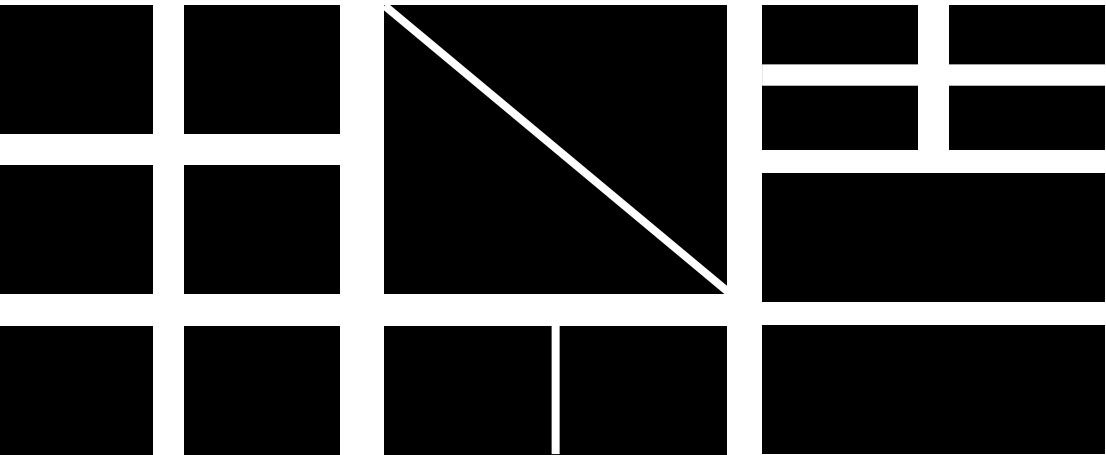
Artist Jim Steranko created a comic page with a layout designed to *intentionally* confuse viewers,

proving that panel layout must maintain a clear path. Take a look at his puzzling page below, and try to interpret what’s going on in the story. Each viewer would likely have a different idea of what’s happening.



Image © 2002 Marvel Comics.

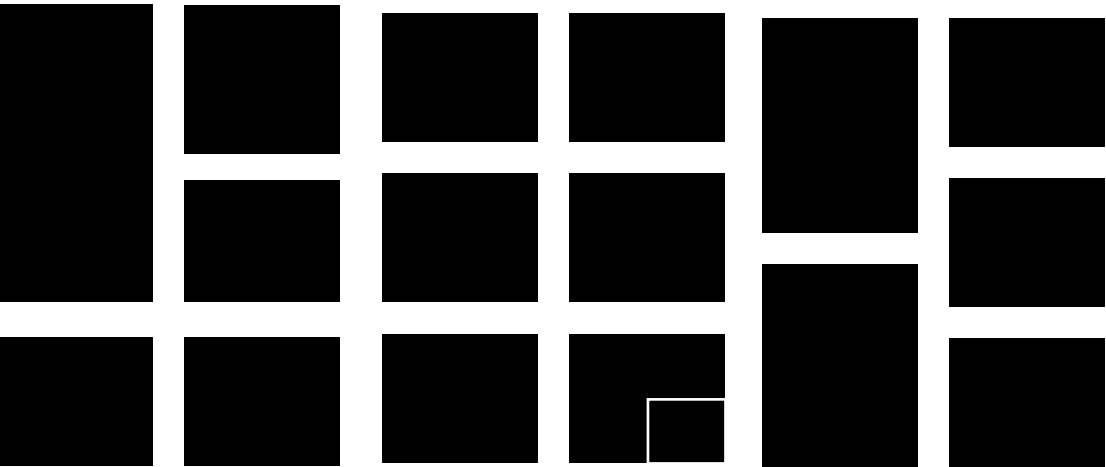
Types of Panel Layouts



Grid

Sandwich

Separation



Blockage

Inserted Panel

Staggering

Grid

At the most basic level of panel layout is the grid. The grid is trustworthy in ensuring the sequence is easy to follow. If each panel is the same size, the content in each square will be perceived as having equal importance.

Sandwich

A slice through the panel can create tension and intrigue in the story, especially in action packed or chaotic moments. Ensuring readers still follow the content from left to right is crucial, and can be achieved by avoiding text in the upper right corner of the second slice as readers would read this first, assuming the second slice is first in the sequence.

Separation

Panel separation is a technique used when time is moving slower in the story. The gaps between the panels allow the reader to assume a gap in time between one panel to the next. Larger panels also indicate time is slowing down, putting greater emphasis on the panel. Conversely, thin panels lined up next to one another indicate the sequence is moving at a faster pace.

Blockage

“Blockage” is the term for when one long panel is followed by two panels stacked vertically. Blockage creates a challenge for the reader to determine which panel comes next: the top or the bottom one? To make this clear, the author can input a speech bubble crossing over panels to guide the reader in the right direction.

Inserted Panel

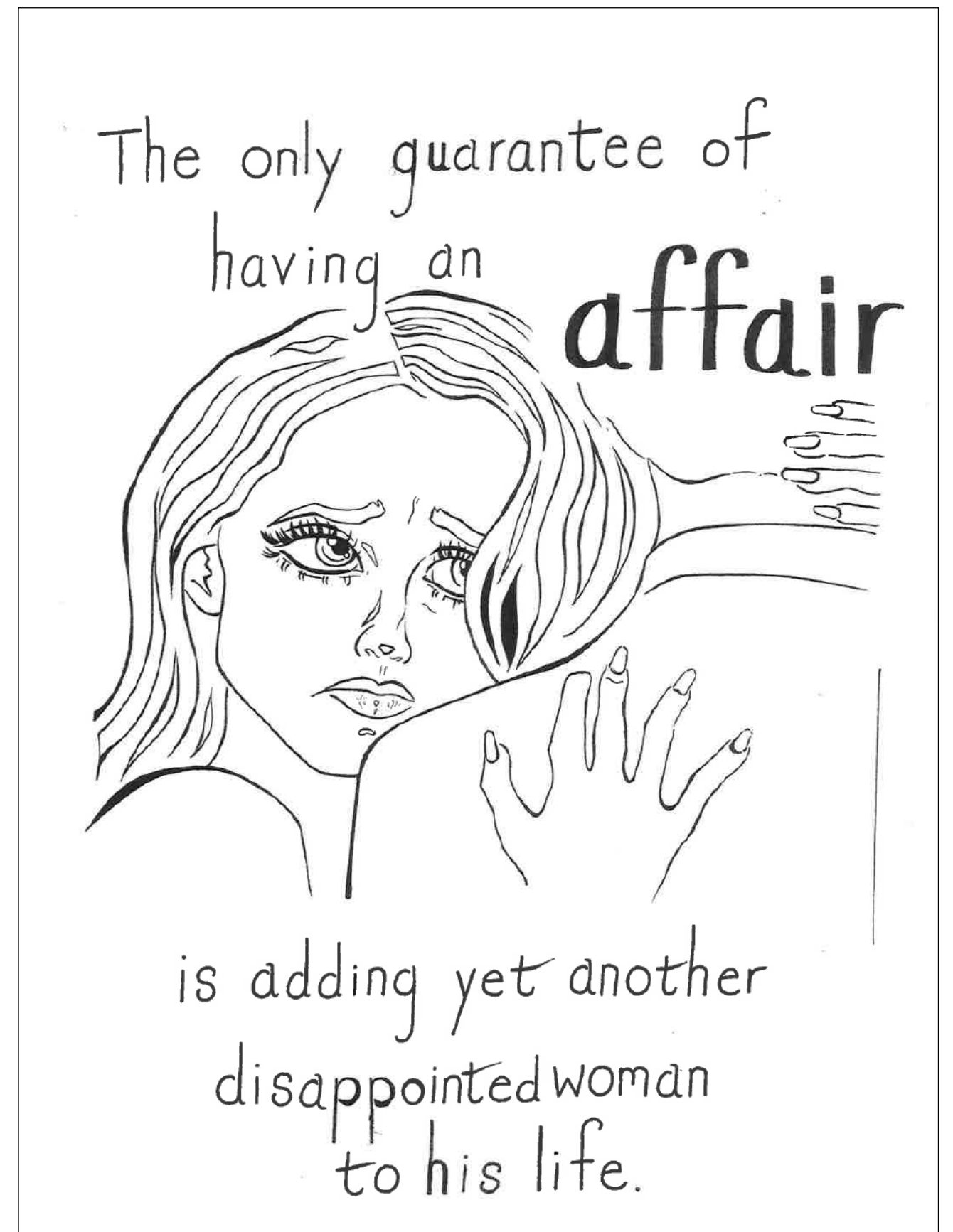
A panel within a panel can create a dramatic effect as images collide together. Similar to the sandwich layout, an unconventional arrangement of panels can indicate moments of stress or tension in the story.

Staggering

Staggered panels are panels that are not perfectly aligned, like in the grid layout. The same issue brought up with blockage arises. It can be tricky to tell the order of panels with staggering. Staggering can be appropriate if one page has two modes of time. Perhaps longer panels are used for slower periods, followed by a fast action sequence. It is still the author’s job to ensure the intended sequence is clear for the reader.



Visual Experiment #1 | Love You, 9x12"
Blackliner Pens



Visual Strategies for Graphic Novels

Visual Strategies for Graphic Novels is a short booklet containing my thesis proposition, essential research questions, and various collections of research on page structure and content flow.

Visual Strategies for Graphic Novels



Isabel Humphrey

(booklet included in physical copy)

Timeline

From Comics to Graphic Novels

●

1839

Histoire de M. Vieux Bois
by Rodolphe Topffer

Töpffer invented a new form of storytelling using a series of images with accompanying text about the comedic misadventures of a romantic man trying (and often failing) to win his love. His work was dramatic, and satirical.

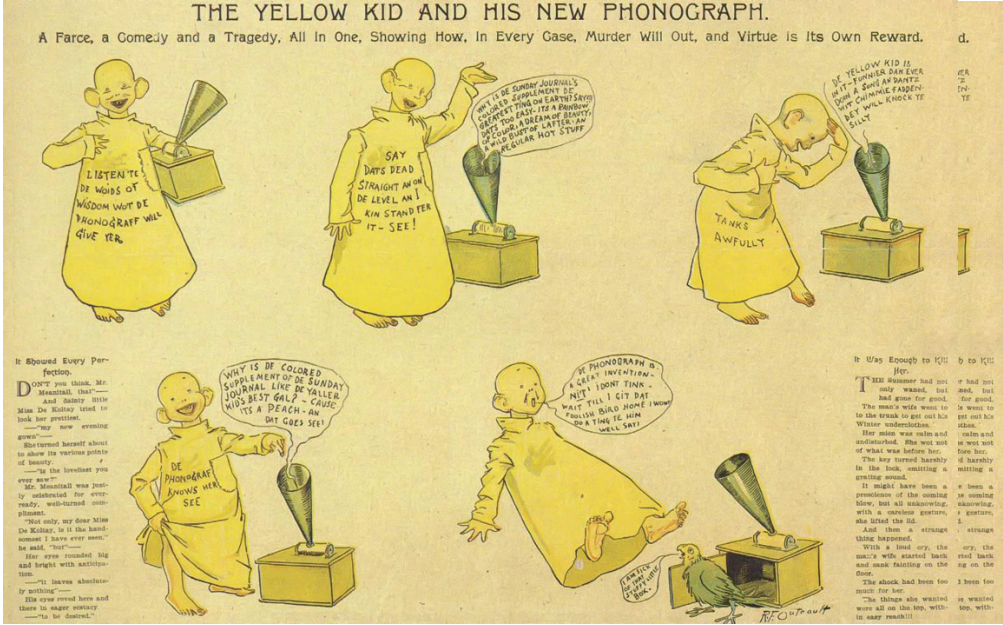


●

1895

The Yellow Kid
by Richard Felton Outcault

The Yellow Kid ran from 1895 — 1898 in *New York World News*, and was one of the first comics to appear in a newspaper. It can be credited with introducing speech bubbles and inspiring the term “yellow journalism.”



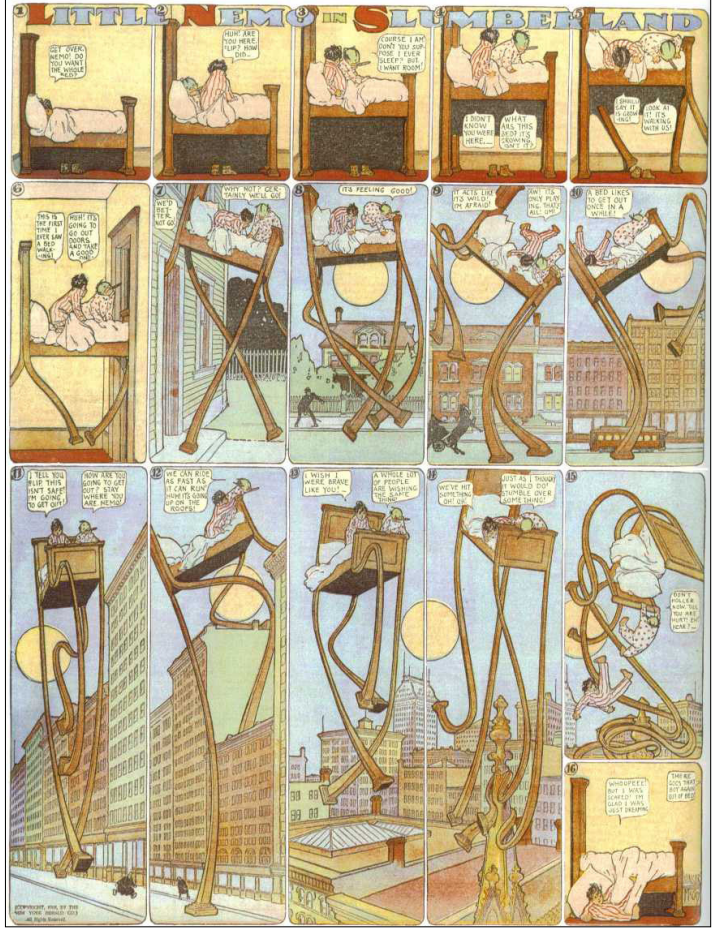
*This timeline only scratches the surface of the most influential works in the genre from each decade. However, the timeline is useful as an overview from how the medium began as humorous newspaper comic strips and developed into lengthy books with critical social commentary and emotional depth.

●

1907

Little Nemo in Slumberland
by Winsor McCay

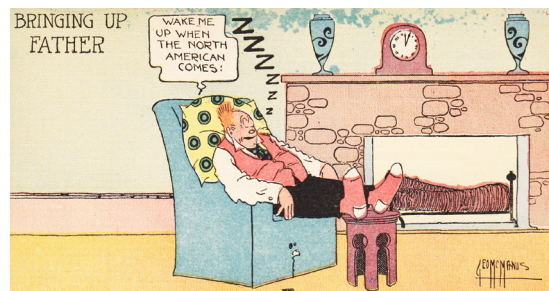
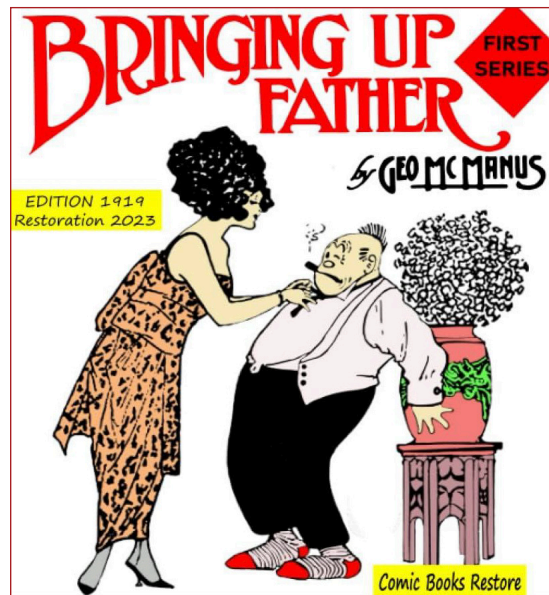
Little Nemo in Slumberland was a full page comic published in the *New York Herald* from 1905 — 1911, about a child who experienced adventures in his dreams until he woke up in the final panel. The illustration style shows influences from Art Nouveau.



1913

Bringing Up Father
by George McManus

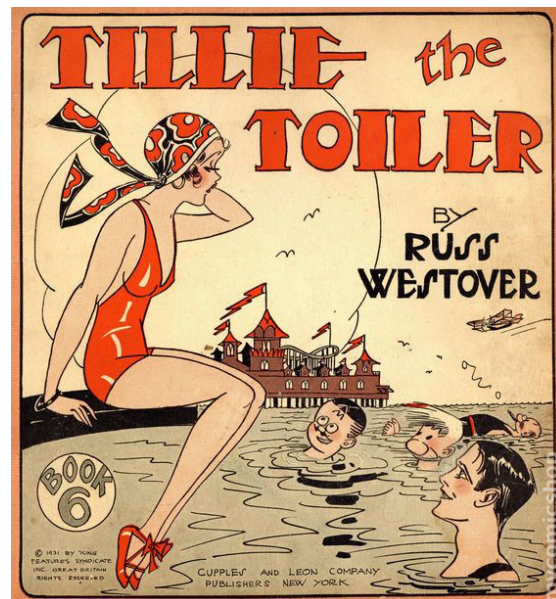
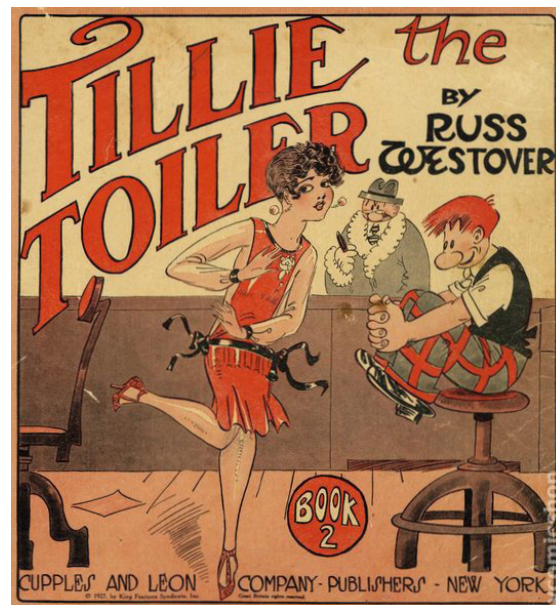
Bringing Up Father chronicled the lives of rich Irish immigrant Jiggs and his wife Maggie. It was distributed by King Features Syndicate from 1914 — 2000.



1921

Tillie the Toiler
by Russ Westover

Tillie the Toiler was a comic strip also distributed by King Features Syndicate from 1921 — 1959. Tillie was a working flapper girl who faced various mishaps. *Tillie the Toiler* was one of the first comics to feature a female lead character.



1922

Mon livre d'heures
(*Passionate Journey*)
by Frans Masereel

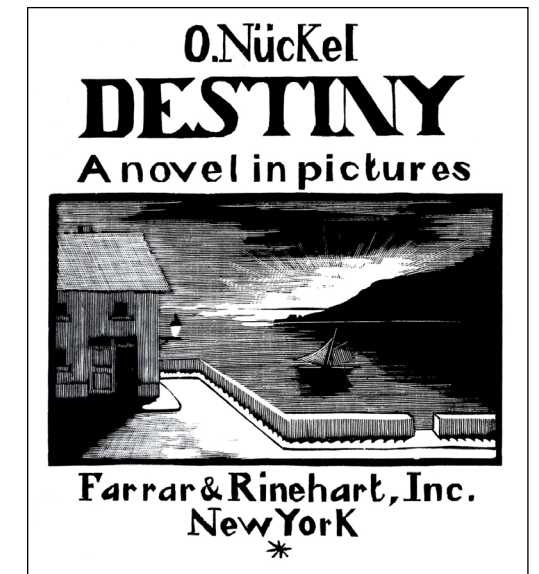
Mon livre d'heures was a series of woodblock prints displaying a wordless novel. The story dissected the life of an urban man in post WWI France.



1930

Schicksal: Eine Geschichte in Bildern (*Destiny: a Novel in Pictures*) by Otto Nuckel

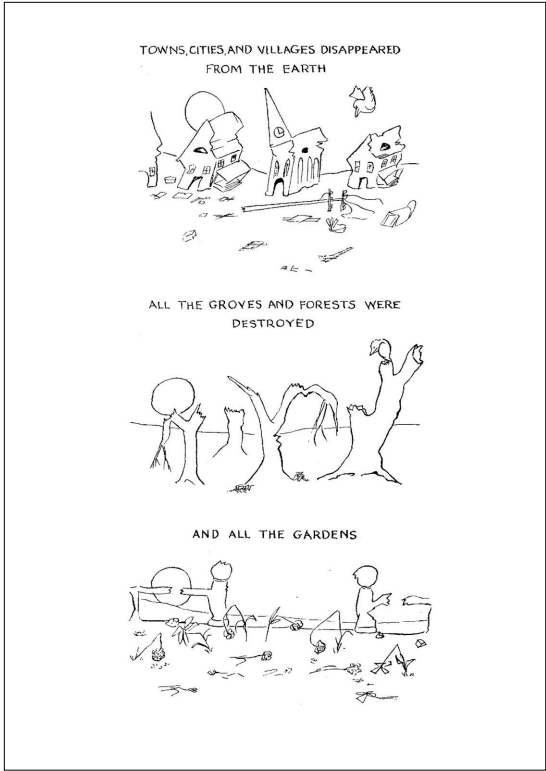
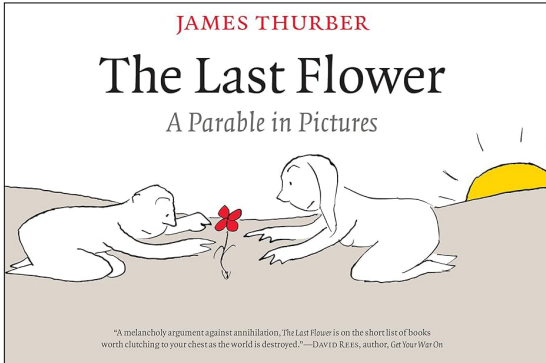
Mon livre d'heures was a series of wordless led-cut prints that told the tragic story of an impoverished German woman in post WWI Germany.



1939

The Last Flower
by James Thurber

The Last Flower was a short story on the aftermath of war. It features minimal color and generous negative space to emphasize the obliteration caused by war.



1949

Young Romance
by John Romita Sr.

John Romita, a key developer of romance comics, published a series called *Young Romance*. It blurred the lines between comic books and magazines, poking fun at the tumultuous love lives of young women in the early 50s.



1961

The Fantastic Four
by Stan Lee and Jack Kirby

DC Comics partnered with Justice League of America to design superhero characters such as Green Lantern and the Flash. To compete against DC Comics, Stan Lee and Jack Kirby of Marvel Comics published *The Fantastic Four*.



1962

Spiderman
by Stan Lee and Steve Ditko

Spiderman debuted in 1962 as comics shifted from newspaper strips to longer books sold in stores. One original *Spiderman* issue sold for \$1.38 million at a 2014 Heritage Auction.



1982

X-Men: God Loves, Man Kills
by Chris Claremont and
Brent Anderson

X-Men told the story of a group of “mutants” with super powers who fought against the “purities” that wanted to normalize them. *X-Men* introduced famous characters like Wolverine, and brought a new intensity to superhero stories.



1986

Batman: The Dark Knight Returns
by Frank Miller, Klaus Janson,
and Lynn Varley

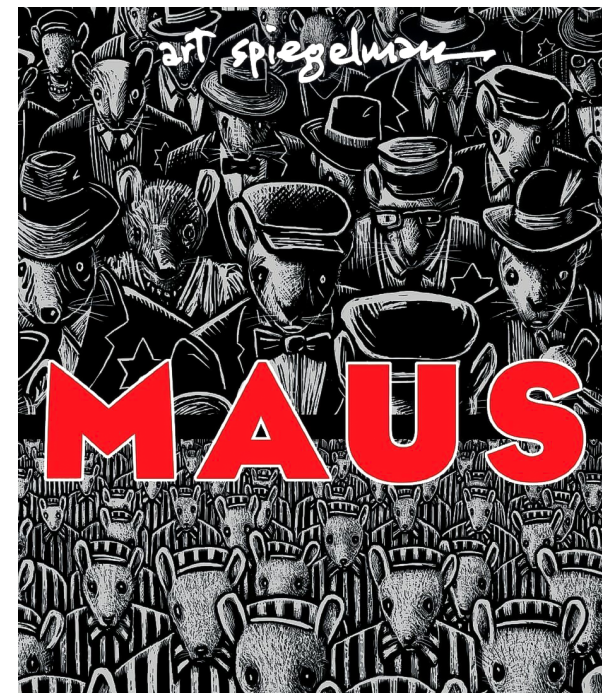
Batman: The Dark Knight Returns pushed the medium’s common use beyond frivolous romance stories and super hero gimmicks. It had a human element of conflict and emotion, adding a newfound depth to comic characters and stories.



1986

Maus by Art Spiegelman

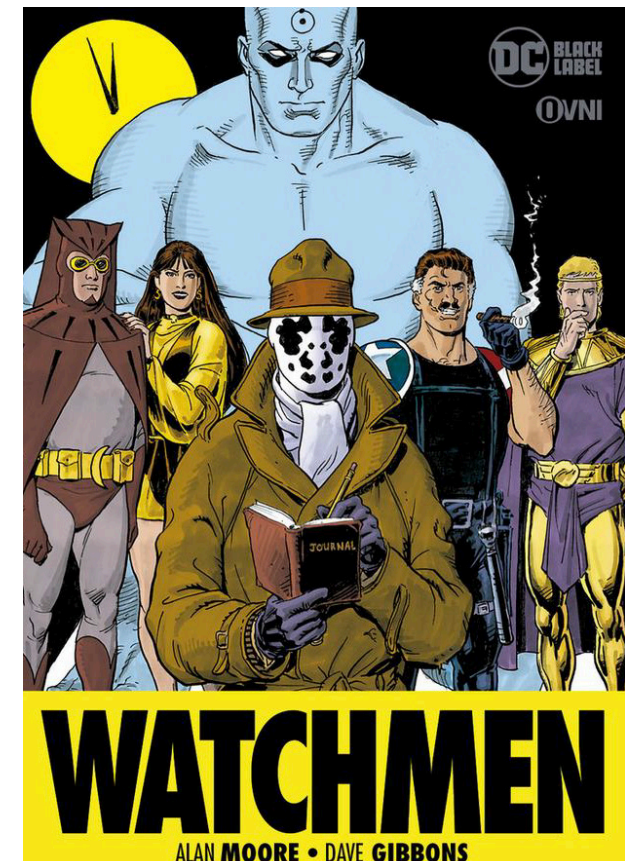
Following *Batman*, *Maus* proved the medium could be used not just for humor, romance, or fantasy, but for telling personal stories and reflecting on history. Spiegelman wrote the novel based on his father’s experience in the holocaust, metaphorically illustrating Nazis as cats and Jews as mice. As the only graphic novel to win the Pulitzer Prize for literature, it brought mainstream legitimacy to graphic novels.



1987

Watchmen by Alan Moore,
Dave Gibbons, and John Higgins

Watchmen was superhero satire. *Watchmen* displayed superheros as real people confronting personal and ethical issues. *Watchmen* is the only graphic novel to have won the Hugo Award.

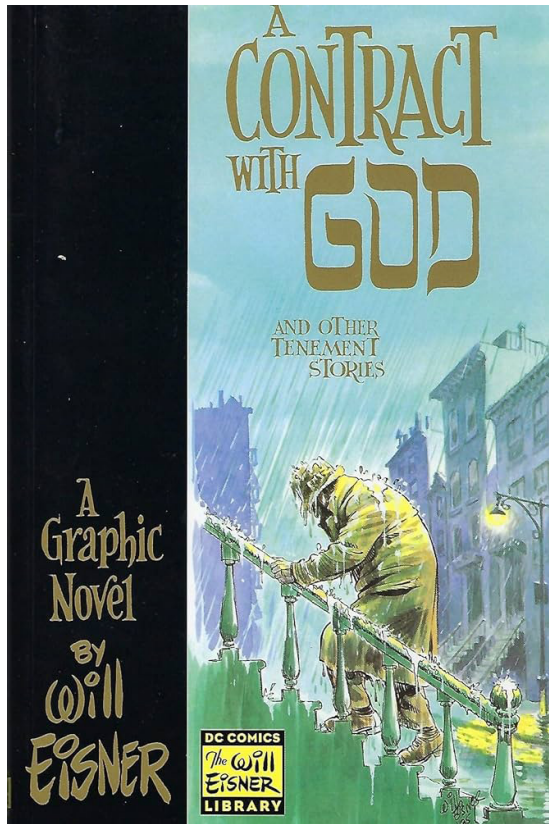


•

1987

A Contract with God
by Will Eisner

A Contract with God by Will Eisner is considered the first official graphic novel. He invented the term “graphic novel” to separate his work from the childish or juvenile associations with comics. The novel illustrates his life as a Jewish immigrant experiencing the Great Depression.

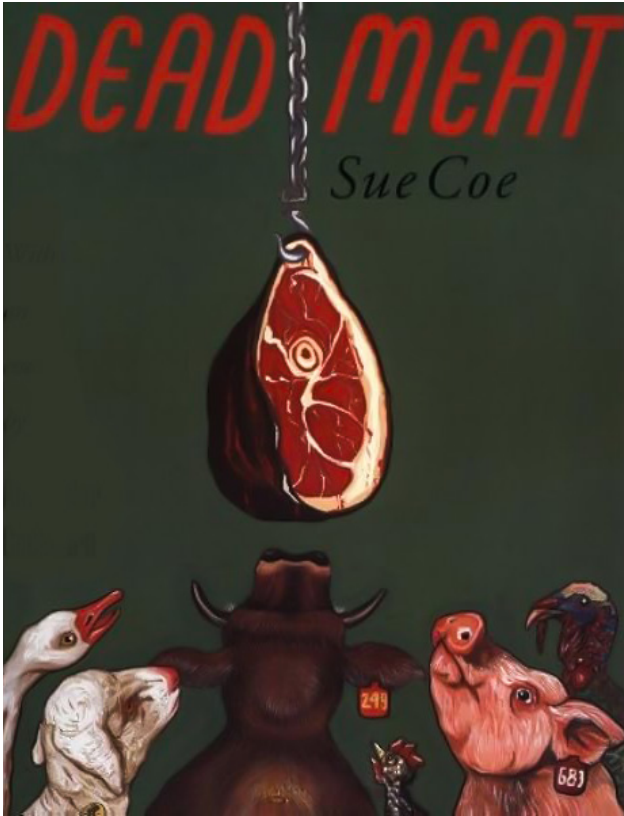


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1995

Dead Meat
by Sue Cole

After several graphic novels critiquing political issues had been published, artists began to recognize the medium as a tool for protest. For example, *Dead Meat* by Sue Coe visually criticizes carnivores by showing the horrors of the meat industry with gritty illustrations.

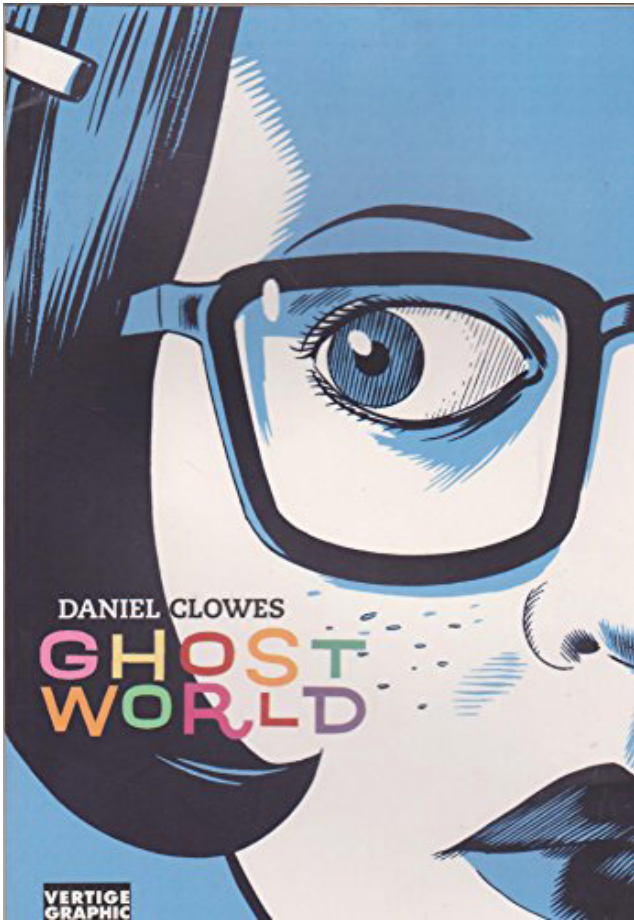


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1997

Ghost World by Daniel Clowe

By the late 90s, graphic novels were still on the road to legitimization, trying to shake off the superhero associations after Marvel and DC Comics’ reign in the 60s. *Ghost World* is an early example of an artist successfully pivoting the medium, displaying comics as literature.

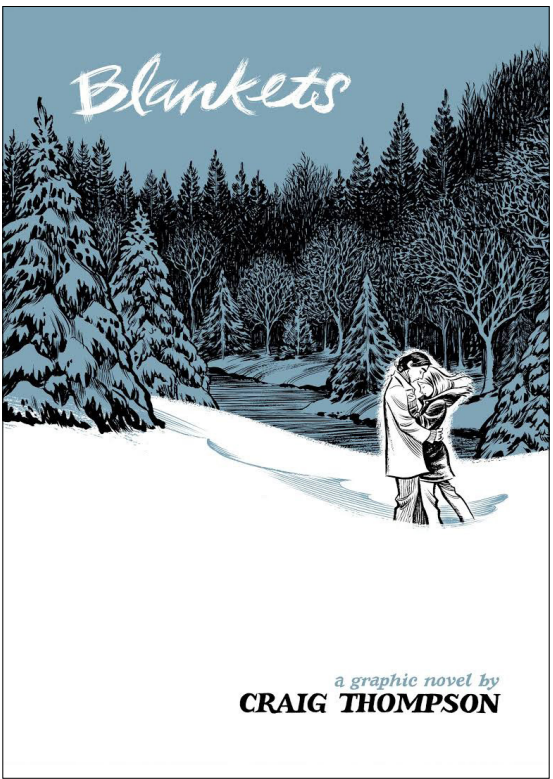


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2003

Blankets by Craig Thompson

Artists began to recognize the format as useful for autobiographical work. *Blankets* tells the story of Thompson’s childhood in an Evangelical Christian family. His illustrations reflect his interpretations of his memories.

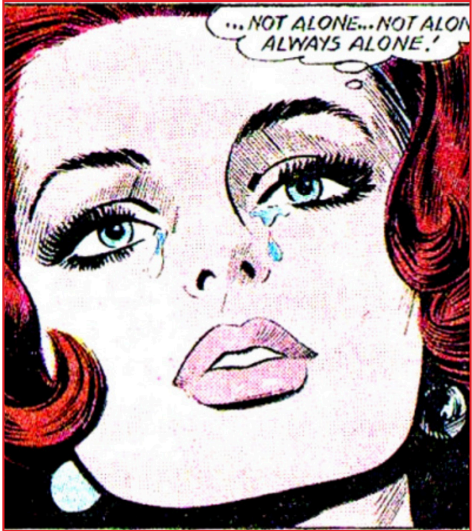


Iconic Characters Throughout Comic History



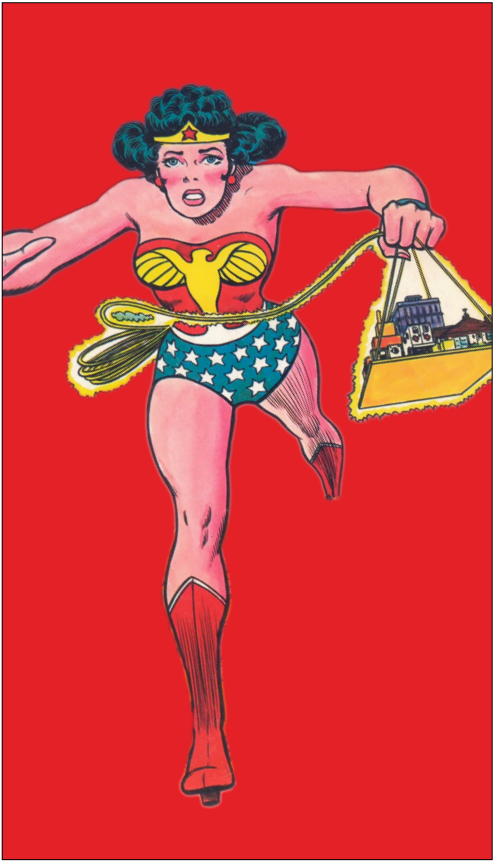
Tillie

Tille from Russ Westover’s *Tillie the Toiler* was a stylish, ambitious working women who embodied the 1920s flapper girl trope and was the most popular female character in newspaper comic strips of the era. Her character helped normalize the presence of independent women in comics, paving the way for more complex female leads. *Tillie the Toiler* was beloved by both men and women, amplifying commentary on pop culture and fashion during a time when women were entering the workforce in larger numbers. Tille’s character was the basis for the comic character Brenda Starr, who emerged as a prominent female lead in the 1920s series *Brenda Starr*.



Women in Romance Comics

Though this exact character’s name is unknown, she is representative of the 1940s era of romance comics, such as those in *Young Romance* by John Romita. Aimed largely at teen girls and women, these comics featured love triangles, heartbreak, and moral lessons, often reinforcing traditional gender roles and societal expectations of romance and femininity post-WWII. This illustration was featured in DC Comic’s *Young Romance* #132 with art by John Romita. These illustrations became inspiration for Roy Lichtenstein and the Pop Art movement.



Wonder Woman

Wonder Woman was created by psychologist William Moulton Marston and artist H.G. Peter, and debuted in *All Star Comics* #8 in 1941. As the only major female superhero of comic’s “Golden Age,” she stood alongside icons like Superman and Batman. Inspired by suffragists and Marston’s belief in female leadership, she helped legitimize comics as a space for exploring gender politics. She was introduced during WWII, and battled Axis powers and colorful villains before shifting to mythological adventures. Subverting the “damsel in distress” trope, she became a symbol of female strength. Now a global icon, she appears in film, TV, games, and more—her debut is celebrated annually on October 21 as Wonder Woman Day.





Rorschach

Rorschach is the leading character of *Watchmen*, created by writer Alan Moore and artist Dave Gibbons. He represented a dark, psychologically complex take on superhero archetypes, challenging the idea of heroes as inherently noble or virtuous. The character influenced future comic artists to tackle heavy themes like politics, mental health, morality, and existential dread, which helped *Watchmen* become the only graphic novel to earn a spot on *Time Magazine's* list of the 100 best novels (2005.)

Rorschach inspired a wave of gritty, flawed protagonists in graphic novels, including Batman. Rorschach's legacy helped to shift comics from pulp entertainment to literary, critically respected works, forever transforming how the graphic novel medium is perceived.



Vladek Spiegelman

The lead character in *Maus* by Art Spiegelman is representative of Spiegelman's father Vladek, whose experiences as a Holocaust survivor form the heart of the narrative. Art's struggles with his father's trauma and their complex relationship are key elements of the story. *Maus* pushed the boundaries of what comics could communicate visually as he focused on historical interpretations rather than fantasy. The use of symbolism through animals not only reinforced the horror of the Holocaust but also allowed Spiegelman to depict the emotional complexities of his father's experiences and their relationship in ways that text alone could not.

This approach gave graphic novels a unique ability to combine emotional depth with historical fact, a shift that inspired a whole generation of creators to use the medium for memoirs and socio-political commentary.



Misa Amane

Misa Amane is a character from *Death Note*, a Japanese manga created by writer Tsugumi Ohba and illustrator Takeshi Obata. Her role in *Death Note* reflects several key elements of Japanese manga that have influenced the comic industry, particularly in the way psychological depth, complex character relationships, and moral ambiguity are explored. Misa's character design, with her gothic-inspired fashion and striking appearance, represents the attention to detail and visual flair that is a hallmark of manga. This approach to character design and stylized visuals has influenced Western comics, particularly in the realm of indie comics and graphic novels, where unique, bold art styles often dominate.

A Color Palette Inspired by Comic History

I created this color palette as a representation of comic history, featuring strong tones of primary colors and electric shades that reflect unconventional and fantastical themes. The mix of subdued and bright tones create a relationship of leadership against following, though both eject vibrant energy. It evokes an overall bright and spunky feel, like pop culture itself. These color combinations cannot typically be applied in professional contexts, nor can they be found in nature.



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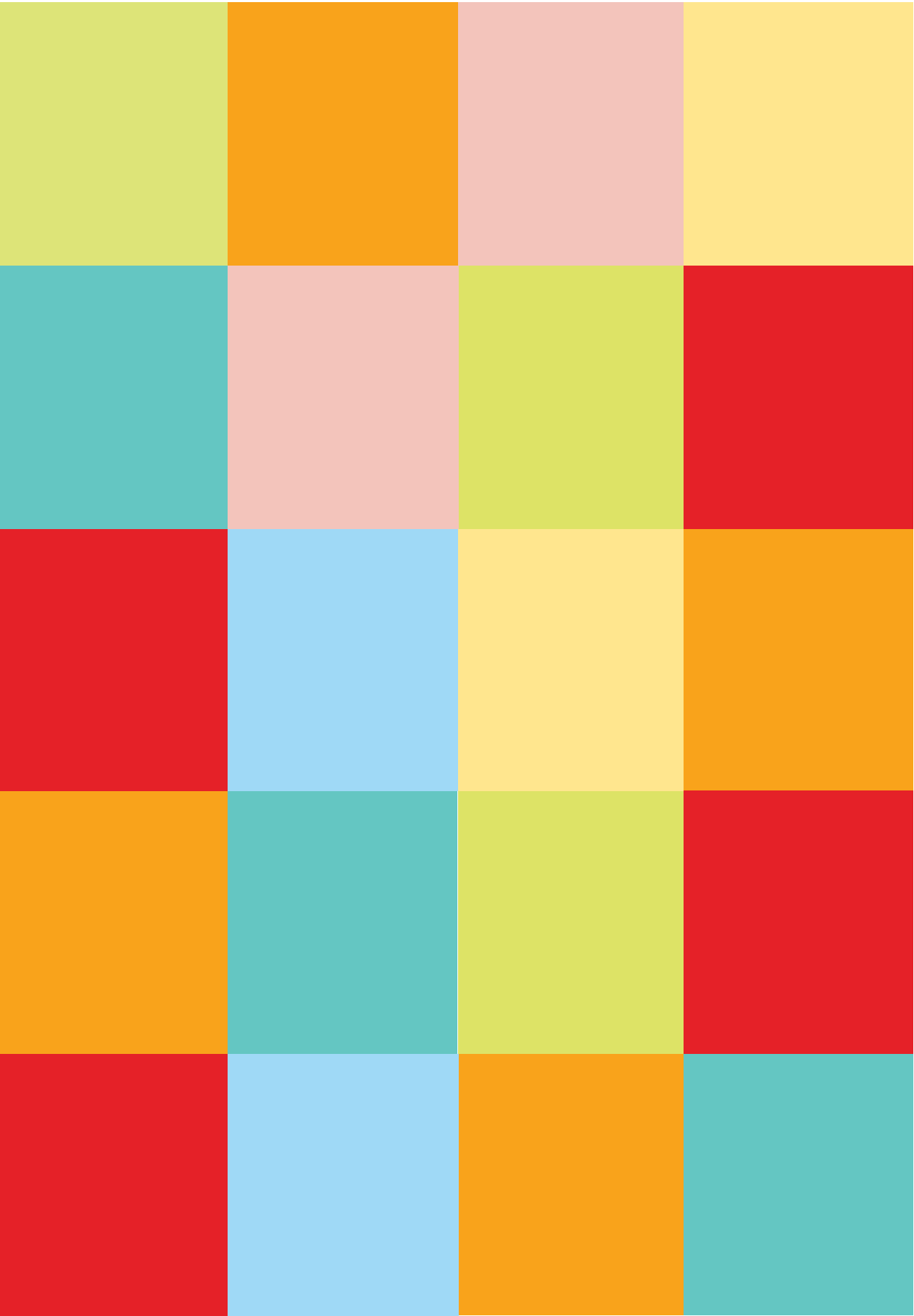
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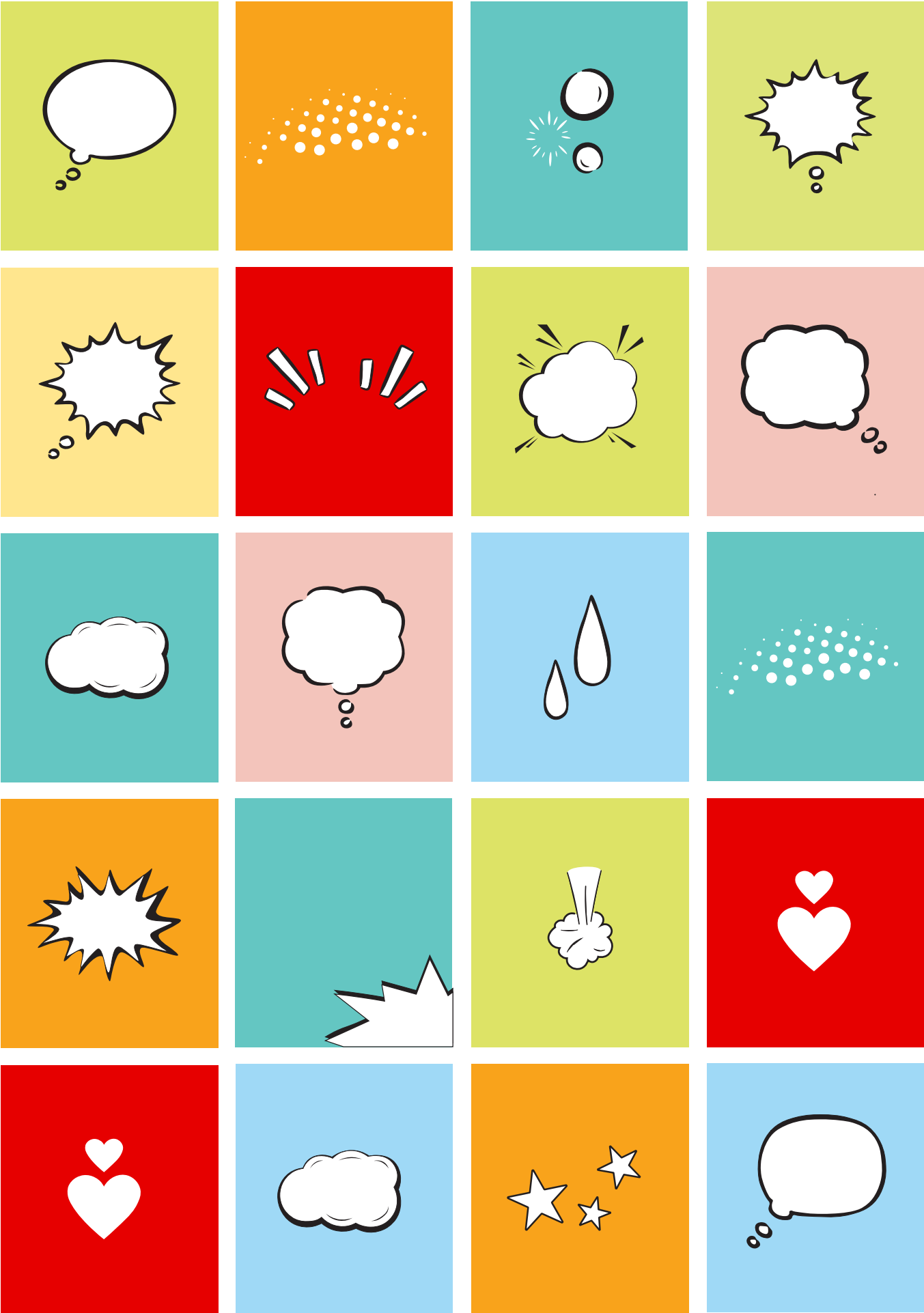
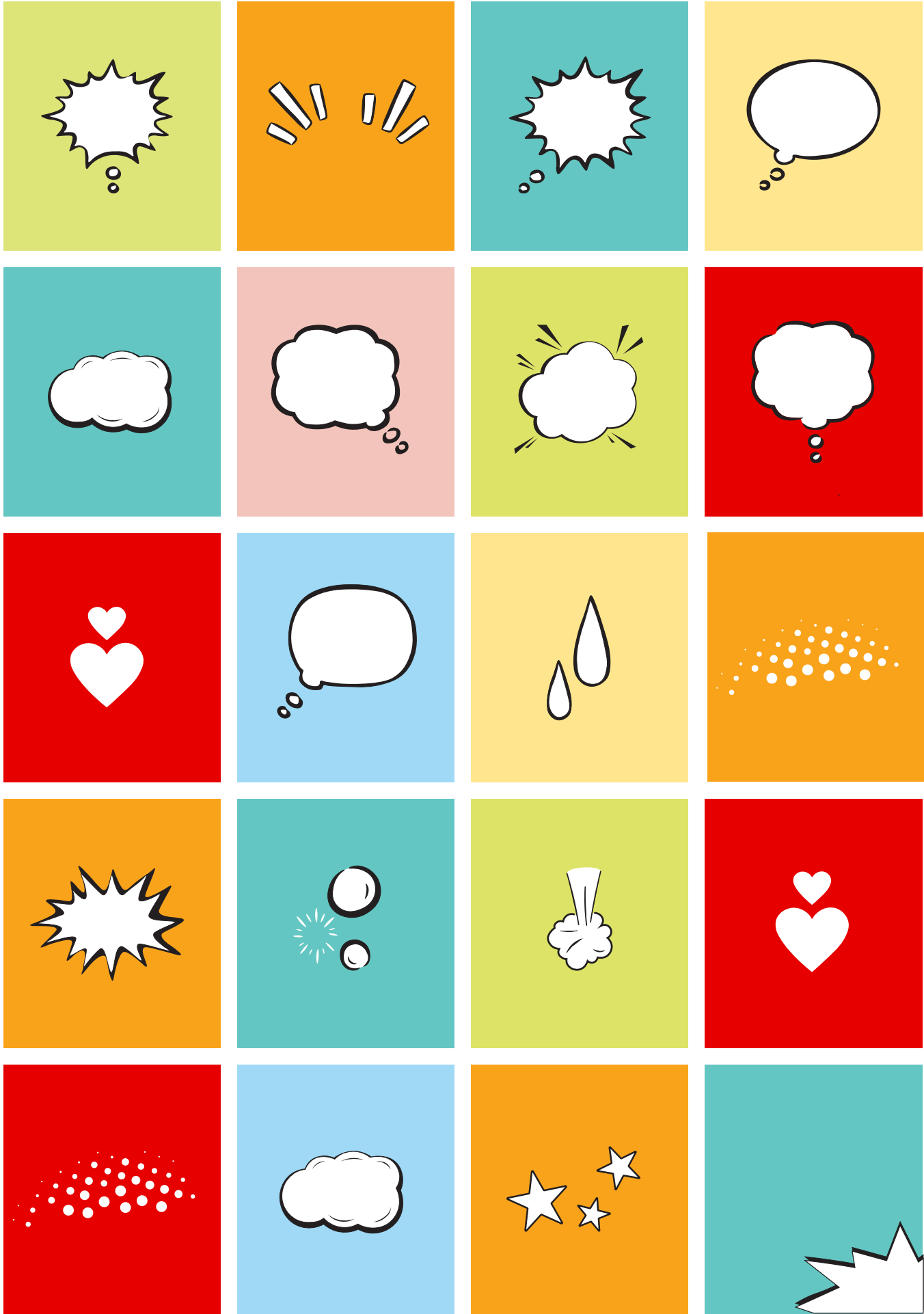


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1. Tillie the Toiler. 1921 2. Young Romance Comics #132. 1964
3. Wonder Woman. 1972 4. Watchman. 1987 5. Maus. 1986 6. Death Note. 2003

Panels POP! Exhibition Poster, 18 x 24"

Panels POP! Exhibition Pamphlet

Panels POP! is a hypothetical exhibition for the Cooper Hewitt museum. It features installations displaying the overall development from comics to graphic novels spanning a century, starting in the 1920s. An artist's talk follows the opening exhibit, with lectures from authors Marjane Satrapi, Art Spiegelman, and myself.



(booklet included in physical copy)

From Pencil to Vector

The illustration process begins with traditional pencil sketches, essential for capturing the raw energy and personality of my concepts. Starting by hand allows me to explore visual ideas freely without the restrictions of software tools.

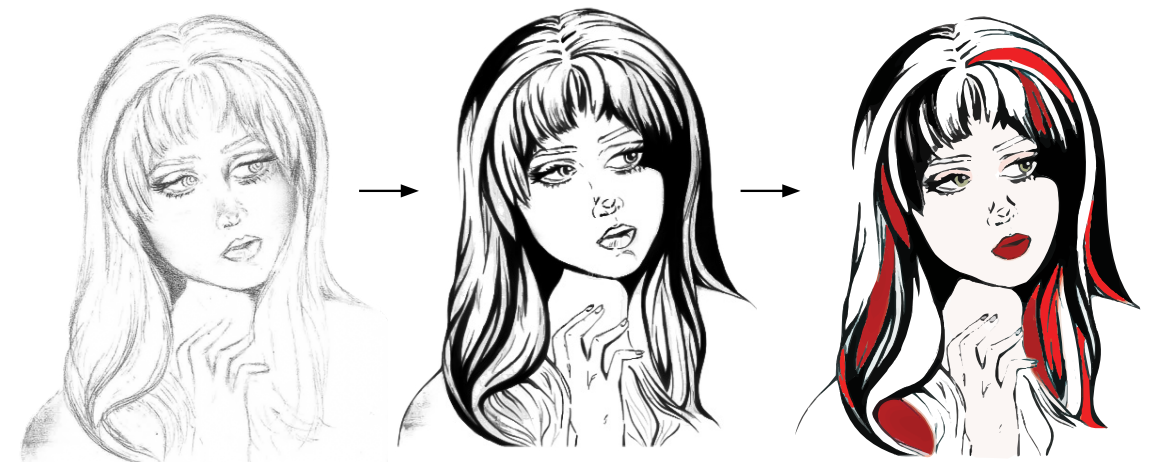
Beginning with pencil, I sketch loosely to experiment with layout and composition, then refine my lines and details as the proportions are established. Working this way helps me stay connected to the emotional and expressive qualities of the illustration, especially when telling a story or designing characters.

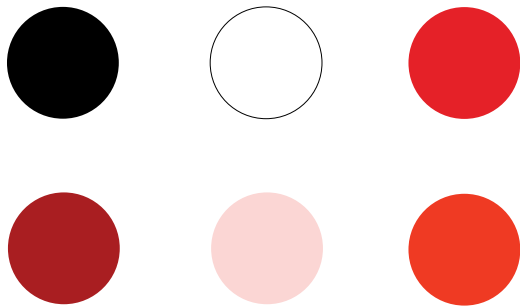
Once the drawing is complete, I move into the digital phase. This part of the process begins with scanning the sketch. One of the most persistent challenges I face is ensuring that the scan is high-resolution—typically at least 300 dpi or higher—to preserve detail and avoid pixelation or blurring. However, scanning isn't always straightforward. Depending on the paper texture, smudges, or the softness of the pencil, the image might come out uneven in tone or require extra editing. Sometimes, I have to adjust contrast levels or clean up the background in Photoshop before I can start vectorizing the image. I've learned that careful scanning and cleanup are crucial to avoid hours of extra work later on.

Many illustrators turn to Illustrator's Image Trace tool to quickly convert raster drawings into vector paths, but I've found that it rarely gives satisfying results. While it can be useful for rough experimentation or style tests, the tool often flattens or oversimplifies complex lines, erasing the subtle line weights and human touches that are important to my work. It also creates messy anchor points that can be difficult to clean up later, especially if I want to edit the shapes or apply consistent strokes and color fills.

Instead, I manually trace over my cleaned-up pencil sketch using the Pen Tool in Adobe Illustrator. This gives me full control over every curve and anchor point, allowing me to preserve the gesture and flow of the original drawing. While it's a more time-consuming process, I find it worth the effort for the clarity and polish it brings. To work faster, I turn to Photoshop to eliminate the white spaces in my drawings with the magic wand tool and add color on a layer below. I pay close attention to line weight and shape consistency, often building

outlines first and then layering in details, shadows, and color. Using vector shapes also allowed me to experiment with scalable compositions and prepare files for various formats—whether it's for print, web, or animation.





In coloring the illustrations of the character who would become Eliza Ruby, a 19 year old girl with the nickname “Lizzy,” I opted for a limited color palette with three shades of red: scarlet, which has some orange tones, roses, the brightest red, and maroon, the deep red that ejects timeless elegance. Along with these red tones are black, white, and dusty pink, sometimes accompanied by other neutral tones in Lizzy’s hair, clothes, or the novel’s setting. While the strong black lines pay homage to Japanese manga, and the red does so to Lichtenstein’s pop art, the color combination displays stark emotion. The color red has a conjoined interpretation of both passion and danger. The focal point is her lips. Her lips are always seen as red, visually commenting on objectification of women. It is both a lovely and harmful attribute for her.

For the illustrations on this page, I played with adding red streaks in her hair to see if I could connect the formal style of the illustrations with the bright and spunky attitudes of 60s comics.



Facial Expressions



Reminiscing



Pausing



Thinking



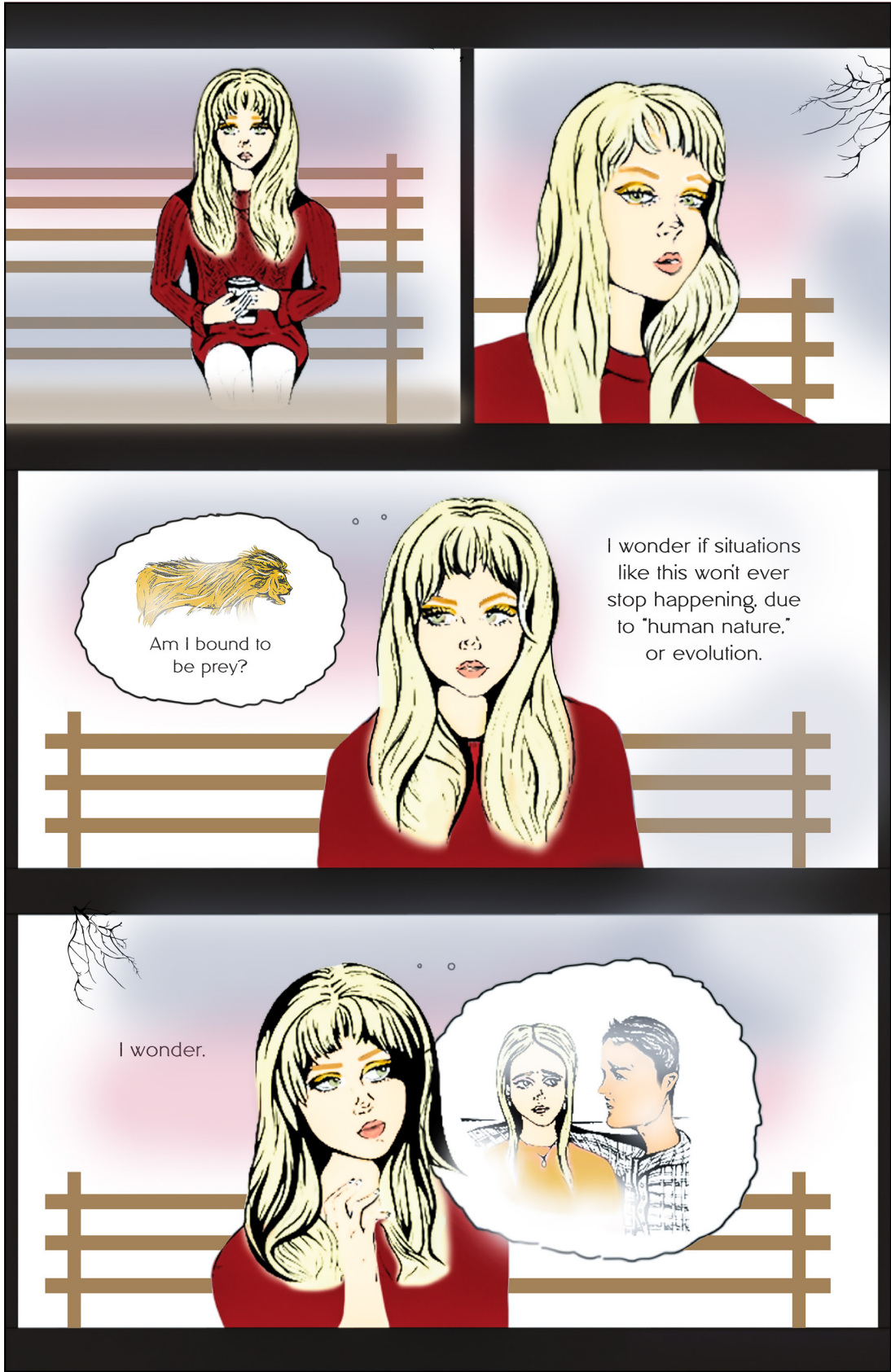
Skepticism



Several websites recommend drafting the character with several facial expressions to create a gallery of expressions to pull from, and to gain a deeper understanding of how the character will visually react to certain scenarios within the plot.

Facial expressions are crucial in graphic novels because they convey emotion, personality, and unspoken tension in a way that immediately connects with readers. Unlike text alone, which describes feelings, or film, which shows fleeting emotions in real time, graphic novels use facial expressions to freeze a moment, allowing the reader to fully absorb a character's internal state.

A raised eyebrow, a smirk, or a tear can reveal hidden emotions or conflicting thoughts, enriching the narrative. Facial expressions in graphic novels create a powerful bridge between visual art and written word, turning static images into emotionally dynamic moments that resonate deeply.



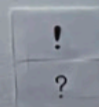
The illustrations can be zoomed in or out, cropped, or repurposed in an infinite number of ways to adjust the flow of content and interpretation of the story.

This page was a draft for a part of my graphic memoir where Lizzy sits alone in a park at twilight. The first panel establishes both the scene and mood, so readers understand where the character is and her mood before the information begins. Next there is a closer snapshot of her face, zooming in and allowing readers to notice and connect with her further. She begins pondering past relationships.

I added a sunset with brush strokes in photo shop to establish the time of day. However, going forward, I prefer for my novel pages to be entirely sharp and clean with distinct contrast, so I would not use these textures again.



The Process of Illustrating a Memoir



Isabel Humphrey

After researching the structure and pacing of sequential art, followed by a look back on the history of comic and graphic novels, the next step for creating a graphic memoir is to begin the creation process. This project shows the steps involved in building one page divided into four phases. As the artist advances from one phase to the next, she uses more advanced tools to develop her design. For phase one, she uses a mechanical pencil, ruler, and eraser to establish the proportions and facial expressions of the characters and setting. Once satisfied with the drawing, the illustrations are input into Adobe Illustrator, where they are traced via Image Trace and cleaned afterward. In phase two, in phase three, three final drawings are scanned and brought into Adobe Illustrator, in which they are traced via Image Trace and cleaned afterward. In phase three, color also makes its first appearance. After the illustrations are imported into Adobe Illustrator to be carefully revised and laid out among panels, the text section is transferred to the artist's scanner and traced into speech and thought bubbles, and the full page is complete. Observe the evolution of the page and compare the workflow steps to the text, now does the inclusion of color and text change the interpretation of the story itself?

Part Three

Conjoined Approach

Introducing Elegant Refinement
to the World of Graphic Novels

3A - Graphic Memoir

- 106. *Wake Up and Smell the Roses*
- 108. Illustration Development

3C - The Future of Graphic Novels

- 114. The Future of Graphic Novels
- 116. Conclusion
- 118. Bibliography
- 122. Acknowledgments
- 125. Thesis Book Design System

Wake Up and Smell the Roses

Symbolism

I chose the title “Wake Up and Smell the Roses” after a quote from one of the characters in the book. When Eliza’s close friend helps her come to an important realization about her relationship, that’s what she says. The line represents a major turning point in the story, and reflects the moment where Eliza’s illusions become shattered.

Overall, the title represents themes of coming of age, the end of innocence, and breaking illusions, which summarizes Eliza’s experience. It means to learn to see what is right in front of you.

I emphasize this concept in the design with a symbol of a rose that is slowly burned throughout each chapter of the novel. While the rose’s aroma initially seems sweet and dreamlike, the character slowly recognizes reality as the plot evolves.

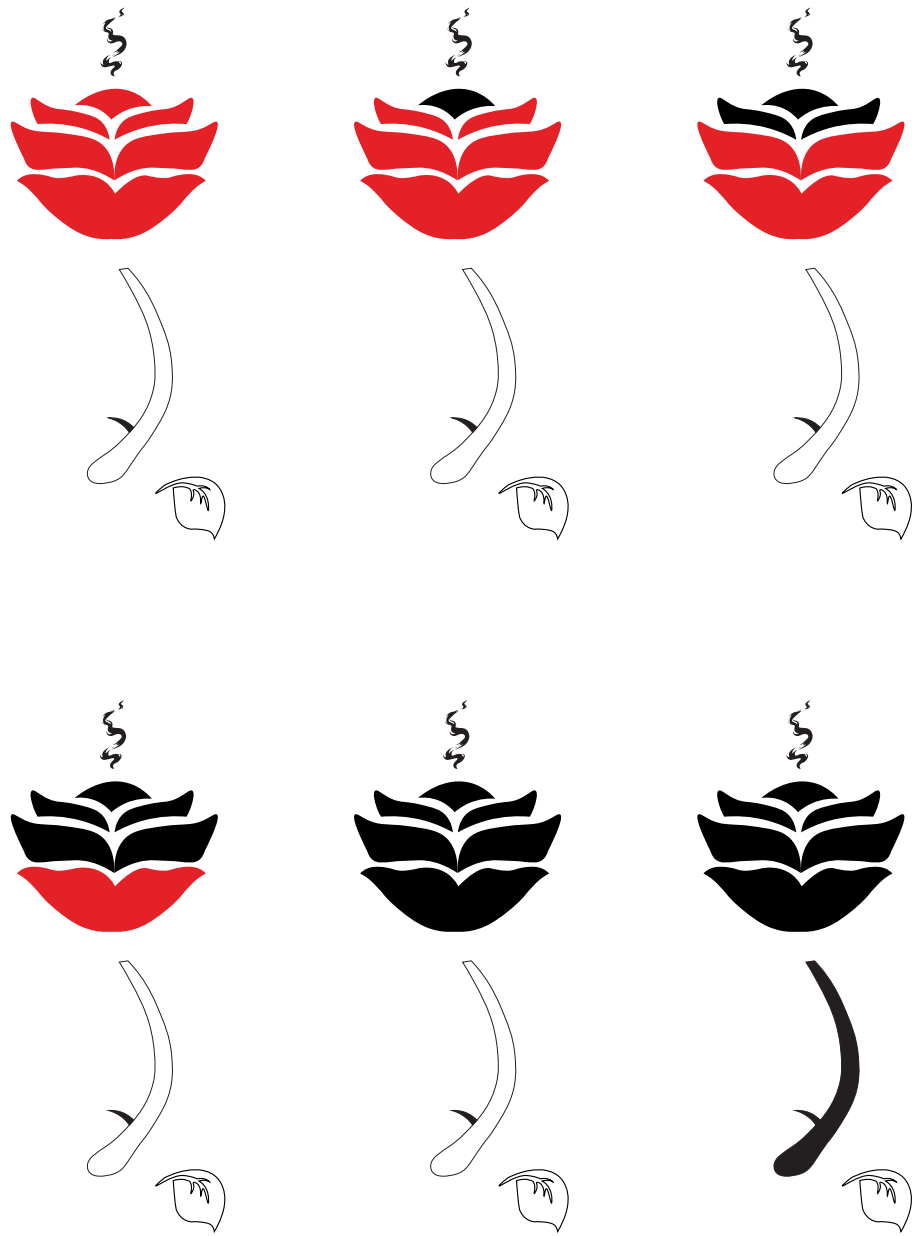


Illustration Development

The illustrations for the first draft of *Wake Up and Smell the Roses* were created using the process outlined in section 2C, *Illustration Process*. I had initially sketched each panel on paper, and then scanned them and added color in Photoshop.



Skill Development

Age 11

Sketching carelessly about my life in middle school.



Age 13

Including more detail and shading.



Age 16

Using the traditional rough and chaotic sketching style of graphic novels, with heavy shading, again about my personal experiences.



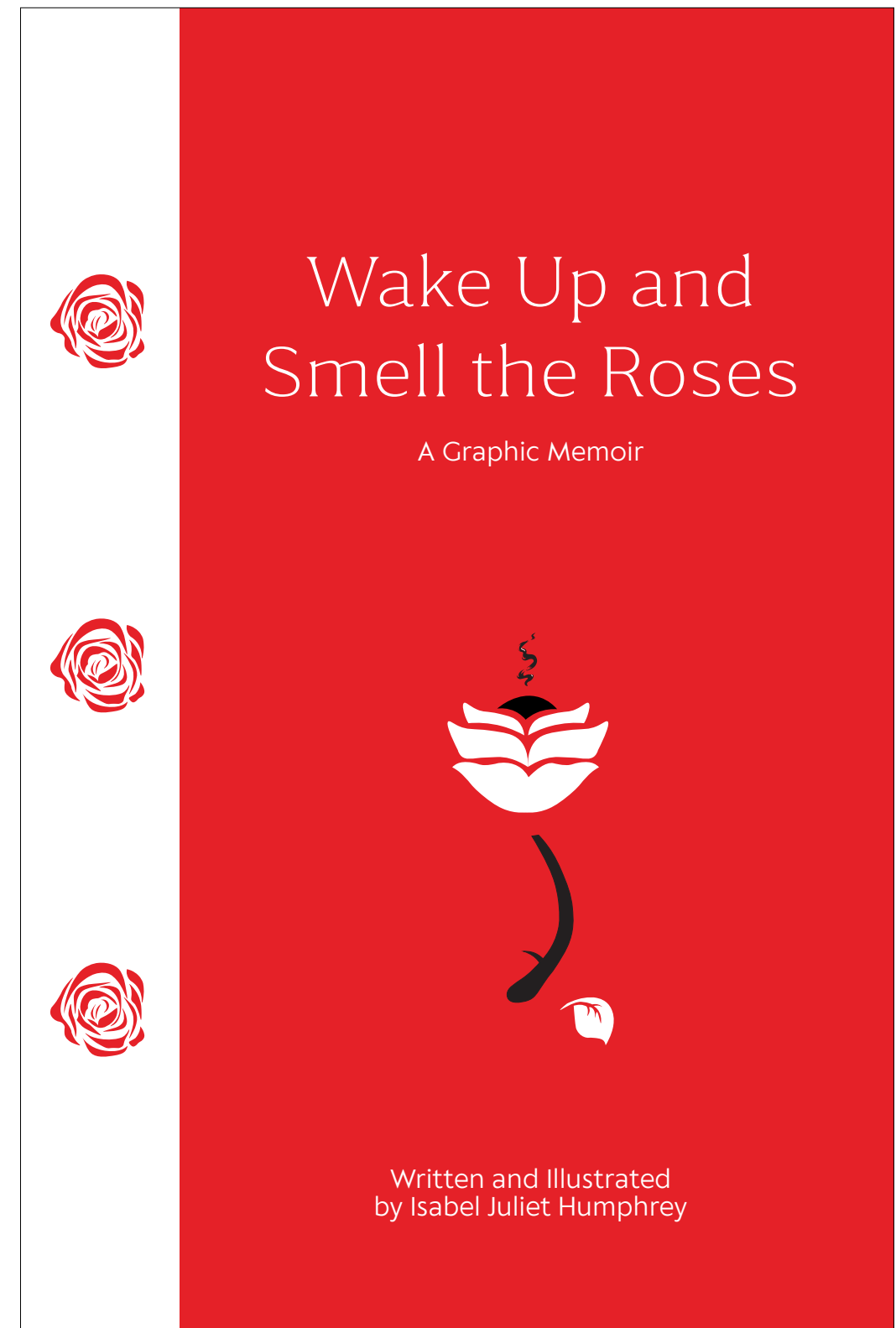
Age 22

Trying again after design education at Corcoran, improving cleanliness and clarity of content flow.



Wake Up and Smell the Roses

Chapter One: *The Pity-Me Method* introduces protagonist Eliza Ruby, a design student who begins working on a project in class and connects the ideas to memories from childhood and deeper theories on human behavior.



The Future of Graphic Novels

A New Way to Read Digitally

Even if graphic novels were sophisticated, mature, and refined in their design, the likelihood of them being read or even seen is slim due to their reliance on print media as entertainment has switched almost entirely to digital media.

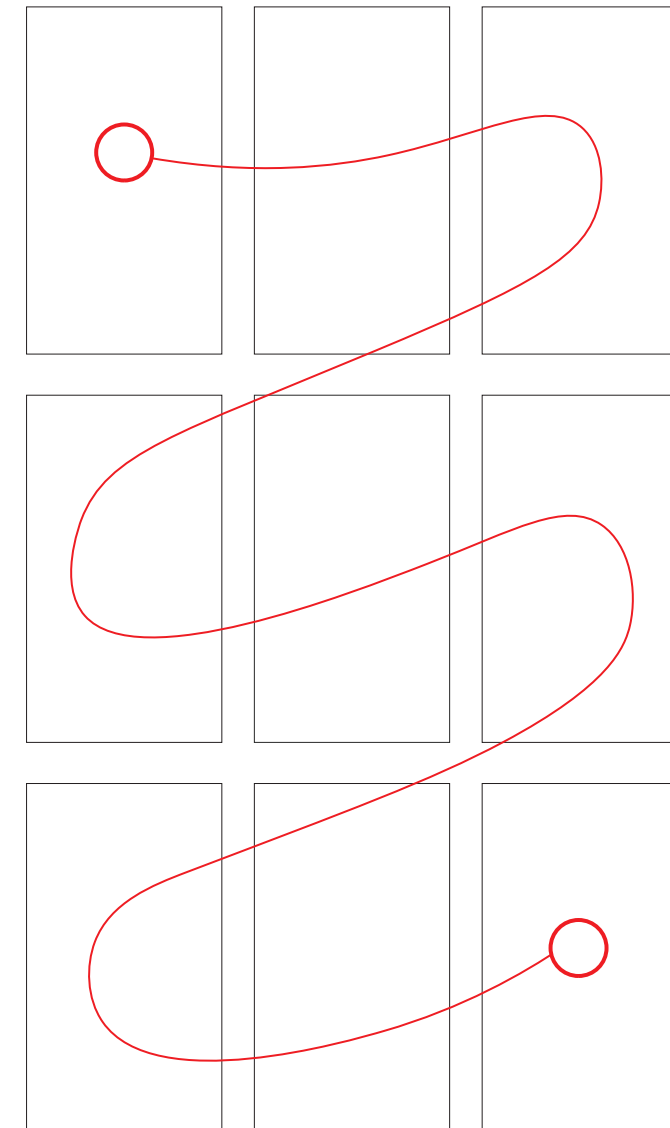
As shown in the timeline from section 2B, comics started as newspaper strips and developed into book formats. They've always been found in physical copy, relying on publication formats to be seen. Currently, some graphic novels are accessible online where the user has to scroll through the pages vertically like they are scrolling through their TikTok or Instagram feed. This format of reading graphic novels digitally is not engaging for the reader.

Furthermore, one common issue with printed graphic novels is how the story falls into the shadow of the illustration. A person who picks up a graphic novel is much more likely to flip through rather than read and digest the story.

To fix both the issues of lack of user engagement in digital graphic novels and shadowed plot lines, a new way to read digitally could be to drag one's finger in the Z format and watch the panels appear. With this method, the reader will find themselves forced to observe the panels one by one and experience plot development with greater attention, and also maintain a sense of control over the media that will make them feel more engaged.

If this experience also included voiceovers for each character, it could be a new form of media that finds a balance between reading a graphic novel and watching a cartoon.

As shown in section 2A, this diagram shows a reader's eye movement across a graphic novel page. Readers could replicate this flow with their finger as they observe the content, having one panel appear after the other only when their finger touches that part of the screen.



Conclusion

This thesis set out to challenge assumptions of graphic novels being inherently juvenile, rough, or lacking in artistic discipline. By framing the graphic novel as a legitimate medium for historical preservation and cultural reflection, the project and research sought to elevate them through elegance and refinement in both form and content. Through lengthy scholarly research, design experimentation, and writing, the process and final work presents how graphic novels can transcend their traditional expectations and can serve as prominent, sophisticated vehicles for visual torytelling.

Comics are often seen as hurried, chaotic, or disposable in popular culture. This thesis responds by implementing the “conjoined approach” that seeks to merge the emotional vulnerability of the autobiographical comics with precision of modern graphic design. It wasn’t a theory but a method: combining freehand illustration with digital tools in order to develop a workflow that honors traditional techniques while also embracing technology and software. This synthesis is central to the project—bridging fine art and digital storytelling.

The graphic novel’s dual role as a visual and literary form was central to this approach. In studying works from accomplished creators, the thesis makes the case that graphic novels are not simply escapist or nostalgic—they are platforms for design thinking. Every decision contained in *Wake Up and Smell the Roses*, from typography to pacing, layout to color palette, has aimed to create visual harmony and emotional resonance.

The second section of this book played a key role in shaping the final design. Part 2A explored visual rhythm and page flow to enhance readability. Historical research in Part 2B connected the project to a broader comics tradition to learn where the medium has been and predict where it can go. Part 2C focused on illustration techniques, allowing for stylistic cohesion and refinement across the memoir.

The result—graphic memoir *Wake Up and Smell the Roses*—is a novel grounded in personal experience but elevated through intentional design. Its themes of identity, disillusionment, and conflict are conveyed through elegant visual language, line work, restrained color palettes, and neat, balanced compositions. Instead of relying on aggressive or chaotic visuals, the project adopts a more nuanced and clean, composed approach. The emotional depth of the story is mirrored in the sophistication of the design.

Ultimately, this thesis has fulfilled its goal of transforming perceptions of the graphic novel. It has demonstrated that, with care and intention, graphic novels can be both literature and art. The final public exhibition of *Wake Up and Smell the Roses* further supports this idea. Presented professionally, it demands the same space and reverence as other creative disciplines in design and fine arts.

In bridging “comic culture,” and refined and detailed design, this project repositions the graphic novel as a credible and compelling form of emotional communication. Through its combined use of traditional and digital methods, and its commitment to storytelling with aesthetic depth, the thesis shows how personal history—when expressed with deep insight—can transcend boundaries and could invite empathy, reflection, and understanding.

Michael, Barson. *Agonizing Love: The Golden Era of Romance Comics* (New York: Harper Design, 2011).

This source provides a comprehensive overview of romance comics, detailing their cultural impact and artistic trends during their “golden age”. It will be useful for understanding romance comics’ visual and narrative conventions, which will inform the illustrations and themes in my graphic novel memoir. Much of my illustration style is inspired by the detail, emotion, and cultural references of romance comics from the 40s and 50s.

Bechdel, Alison. *Fun Home* (n.p.: 2022).

Bechdel’s graphic memoir is a seminal work in the genre, juxtaposing personal identity with broader social contexts. This source was selected for its unique storytelling techniques and autobiographical nature, which will inspire my approach to communicating social and cultural reflection through illustration and personal experience

Bart H. Beaty, and Stephen Weiner. *Critical Survey of Graphic Novels: History, Theme, and Technique* (Salem Press, 2019).

This survey offers an in-depth analysis of graphic novels, examining various themes and techniques and overviewing the history of the medium. It will be relevant for understanding the evolution of comics into graphic novels, and will provide valuable references for projects in the field. This source thoroughly explains the purpose and effect of the graphic novel medium, which is central to my thesis topic.

Peyton Brunet, and Blair Davis. *Comic Book Women: Characters, Creators, and Culture in the Golden Age 1st ed.* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2022).

This book explores the contributions of women to comic book history. Including this source will help me design and conceptualize the female lead in my novel Wake Up and Smell the Roses. As a female author, this source will help provide insights into how female creators navigated the comic industry.

McCloud, Scott. *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art* (Northampton, MA: Tundra Pub., 1993).

McCloud’s analysis of comic theory is essential for grasping the mechanics of visual storytelling. His concepts on time, space, and panel transitions will guide my illustration style and narrative pacing, ensuring a more impactful storytelling experience. It will also enhance the structure of my illustrations and panels by grounding them in a logical sequence.

Lee, Deborah. *In Limbo*, 1st ed. (New York, NY: First Second, 2023).

Lee’s graphic novel addresses themes of identity and cultural heritage, relevant to my exploration of personal narrative. The visual style and emotional depth in her work will serve as a reference for my own illustrations and themes of self-discovery.

Donkin, Andrew et al. *Between Shades of Gray: The Graphic Novel* (New York: Philomel Books, 2021).

This adaptation of a historical novel into graphic format highlights how to convey serious themes through visuals. Its balance of storytelling and illustration will inform how I tackle potentially heavy themes in my memoir with sensitivity and nuance.

Kelcey Ervick, and Tom Hart eds. *The Rose Metal Press Field Guide to Graphic Literature: Artists and Writers on Creating Graphic Narratives, Poetry Comics, and Literary Collage* (Brookline, MA: Rose Metal Press, Incorporated, 2023).

This guide features insights from various creators on crafting graphic narratives. It will be valuable for practical advice on blending text and imagery effectively, which is crucial for my project’s narrative style.

Nolan, Michelle. *Love on the Racks: A History of American Romance Comics* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2008).

Nolan’s history of romance comics will provide context for the cultural significance of the genre. Understanding this background will help me incorporate relevant pop culture references while honoring the genre’s roots.

Alan Moore, and Dave Gibbons. *Watchmen* (New York, NY: DC Comics, 2013).

As a landmark graphic novel, Watchmen showcases the potential of the medium to address complex themes and narratives. Analyzing its structure and storytelling will inform how I can push the boundaries of my own graphic novel memoir.

McCarthy, David. *Pop Art* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

This text explores the pop art movement and its cultural implications. It will provide insight into incorporating pop culture references into my memoir and inspire my artistic style, especially in blending high and low art.

Satrapi’s graphic memoir merges personal and political narratives, serving as a model for integrating broader cultural themes. Her unique visual style and storytelling approach will influence how I present my own story.

Garcia, Santiago. *On the Graphic Novel*, trans. Bruce Campbell (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2015).

This book examines the form and evolution of graphic novels, providing theoretical perspectives that will enhance my understanding of the genre. It will guide me in making informed artistic and narrative choices.

Williams, Paul. *Dreaming the Graphic Novel: The Novelization of Comics* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2020).

This work discusses the novelization process in comics, which will be relevant as I consider how to transform personal narratives into a cohesive graphic novel format. It will help me navigate the intersection of prose and illustration effectively.

Colophon

Designed, written, and printed by Isabel Humphrey, 2025. Perfect bound with hard cover. Typefaces include the Klein font family by Zetafonts for body text and the Accia Piano font family by Andriy Konstantynov at the Mint Type foundry for headers and captions.

Acknowledgments

I would like to express my heartfelt gratitude to the community at GW and Corcoran School of the Arts and Design for allowing me to find my place as a graphic designer. To my professors Marc Choi, Sam Shelton, and Siobhan Rigg, thank you for your guidance, wisdom, and unwavering support. In your classes I was able to advance and achieve things I never thought I could be capable of. To my classmates, especially Kelly Rahimi, Mei Mei Lu, and Samar Altuwayjiri, going alongside this journey beside you has made the experience enjoyable as we leaned on one another for support throughout our rigorous coursework. Lastly, I am deeply grateful to my parents James and Linda Humphrey and my brother Jack Humphrey for their unconditional love, sacrifices, and belief in my talent. To my extended family Stephen and Laura Humphrey and Richard and Sheri Humphrey, thank you for always cheering me on and reminding me of my strength. Each of you has played a vital role in helping me grow into the person I am today—thank you from the bottom of my heart.



About the Author



Isabel Juliet Humphrey is a graduating senior at the George Washington University, completing a BFA in Graphic Design with a Marketing Minor. She currently works as the graphic designer for the programming and creative strategy team at the GW Office of Student Life, designing visuals for event marketing. Growing up in New York City with a journalist and music teacher as parents, Isabel has always been invested in creative pursuits. Before college, she took classes at the Art Students League of New York, The 92nd St Y, and the Cooper Union. Her portfolio earned her the Corcoran Scholars Award and the Josephine R. Shepard Scholarship. She has consistently earned a spot on the Dean's List at GW. Isabel's designs are recognized for their sharp refinement and exquisite nature. As a naturally introspective and creative individual, her success comes from her ability to closely observe the world around her, enabling her to craft meaningful, well-informed ideas.