# Chains of Common Suffering:
# Autobiographical Comics about Mental Illness

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**Declaration of Originality**

This dissertation is submitted by the undersigned to the Institute of Art Design & Technology, Dun Laoghaire in partial fulfilment of the examination for the BA (Honours) in Animation. It is entirely the author's own work except where noted and has not been submitted for an award from this or any other educational institution.

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## Abstract

The creation and consumption of comics focused on the experiences of living with mental illness have proliferated throughout the history of comics. These comics often serve a dual purpose of allowing the artist to understand their experience through the narrativization process, as well as offering a sense of connection with their audience. This thesis investigates the use of comics as a medium for autobiography about mental illness with reference to a selection of English language autobiographical comics and graphic memoirs, with a focus on those whose visual and textual style and tone switches between serious and humorous registers throughout. The seminal work of Justin Green in *Binky Brown Meets the Holy Virgin Mary* (1972) will be considered in this context, followed by discussion of Allie Brosh's webcomic turned bestseller *Hyperbole and a Half* (2013) and finally the graphic novel *It's Lonely at the Centre of the Earth* (2022) by Zoe Thorogood. The analysis will focus on the texts' representations of the self, truth, humour and the possibility of catharsis through autography about mental illness.

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# Introduction

> Comics can make visible both external features of a condition, and internal, cognitive and emotional features that are otherwise hard to communicate accurately.[1]

Since its nascence in Europe[2] in the 19th century after the invention of the printing press, the medium of comics has been used to confront and communicate the depths of the human psyche and provide an additional visual dimension and language into the literary genres of life writing and autobiography. The name 'graphic medicine' was coined in 2007 by Ian Williams to describe "the intersection of the medium of comics and the discourse of healthcare"[3] and includes in its focus how cartoonists have used the comics medium to capture the emotional and individual experience of living with illnesses. This thesis narrows its focus to considering specific autobiographical comics about mental illness and explores how the hybrid verbo-visual language of comics makes them adept at externalizing unseen struggles and communicating unheard perspectives.

For brevity, this thesis will borrow the term 'autography' for the practice of creating autobiographical comics from Gillian Whitlock's coining of the term for graphic autobiography in the essay "Autographics: The Seeing 'I' Of The Comics".[4] Similarly, Whitlock's term for the 'autobiographical avatar' or 'avatar' as a distinct entity from the author will be used throughout this thesis to describe the authors' representations of themselves on the comic page as separate from their lived reality.

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[1] Hillary Chute. *Why Comics? From Underground to Everywhere*. (New York: HarperCollins, 2017). "Why Illness & Disability?", p.2.
[2] This thesis limits its scope to English language comics from the Anglo-American style of comics in its case studies and therefore does not refer to the independent but interrelated development of sequential art in other cultures, most notably Japanese manga or the Franco-Belgian *bande dessinée.*
[3] MK Czerwiec, Ian Williams, Susan Merrill Squier, Michael J. Green, Kimberly R. Myers, and Scott T. Smith. *Graphic Medicine Manifesto*. (Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2015), p.1.
[4] Gillian Whitlock. 'Autographics: The Seeing "I" of the Comics'. *Modern Fiction Studies* 52.4 (Winter 2006): pp. 965–79.

The process of comics creation requires creators to engage with their conception of the self in what Elisabeth El Refaie calls pictorial embodiment. Frequently in autobiography, these self-portraits are rendered plural: ”the self in all life writing can be said to be tacitly plural, including a divergence between, at the very least, *the real-life I* (the author), the *narrating I* (the self who tells), and the *experiencing I* (the self told about).”[5] This is particularly relevant in autography about mental illness, where ones' conception of self is often fragmented by the demands of the illness. This thesis will examine how its case studies explore and represent this multiplicity of the self through the medium of comics.

This thesis will focus on specific instances of autography about mental illness from different points in the history of comics, beginning in Chapter 1 with Justin Green's *Binky Brown Meets the Holy Virgin Mary* (1972) as situated in the underground comix movement: often considered the genesis of mental illness autography. Chapter 2 will focus on the work of Allie Brosh on depression in the 2010s webcomic *Hyperbole and a Half.* Chapter 3 will consider *It's Lonely at the Centre of the Earth* (2022) by Zoe Thorogood. These examples will be examined in how they handle representations of self through their multiple autobiographical avatars and how they navigate the “emotional truth”[6] of their experience in a narrative form disinclined to realism. These case studies will focus on how and why humour is used in these examples of mental illness autography and the idea of achieving catharsis through autography.

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[5] Elisabeth El Refaie. *Autobiographical Comics: Life Writing in Pictures*. (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2012), p.53.
[6] Quote from Phoebe Gloeckner in the panel on Comics and Autobiography on May 19 2012, moderated by Deborah Nelson, as transcribed in *Critical Inquiry* 40 (Spring 2014), pp.86-103.

# Chapter One:

## Mental Illness Autography in Underground Comix:

## Justin Green and *Binky Brown Meets the Holy Virgin Mary*

### 1.1: The Underground Comix Movement

> … where the Code had stipulated 'no violence', 'no sex', 'no drugs' and 'no social relevance', the underground comix would indulge themselves to the maximum in every category. If the code meant, essentially, that a comic was prevented from saying anything meaningful about the real world, then by defying it this possibility was reawakened.[7]

Elements of autobiography can be seen throughout the history of comics, but the self-aware and confessional style of autography that this thesis will focus its study on has inextricable roots in the American underground comix movement of the 1960s and 1970s. Following the Golden Age of superhero comics of the 1940s and 1950s, the comic book industry had declined for multiple reasons: the increasing availability of television sets in America led to television replacing comic books as the dominant mode of entertainment, the market could not support the sustained influx of publishers, and the appeal of the superhero had faded over the years post-WW2.[8]

Notably in this context, the content[9] of comic books been neutered by the strict censure of the Comics Code Authority (CCA), after Dr. Fredric Wertham's book *Seduction of the Innocent* (1954) crystallized the moral panic that had been brewing in America around comic books and their ability to cause juvenile delinquency.[10] The CCA was an attempt by comics publishers to self-regulate the comic book industry to

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[7] Roger Sabin, *Comics, Comix and Graphic Novels* (London: Phaidon Press Limited, 1996), p.92.
[8] Randy Duncan and Matthew J. Smith, *The Power of Comics: History, Form and Culture* (London: The Continuum International Publishing Group Ltd, 2009): p.40.
[9] In *Seal of Approval: The History of the Comics Code* (1998), Amy Kiste Nyberg refutes the misconception that Wertham and the Code were primarily responsible for the decline in the American comics industry, citing instead distribution issues and competition with television.
[10] Ryan Chaloner Winton Hall and Susan Hatters Friedman, 'Comic Books, Dr. Wertham, and the Villains of Forensic Psychiatry', *Journal of the American Academy of Psychiatry and the Law Online*, 6 October 2020. https://jaapl.org/content/early/2020/10/06/JAAPL.200041-20.

appease the American public, who were concerned about the impact that comic books depicting violence, sex and immoral behaviour were having on the country's youth. Like the Hays Code of the film industry in the 1930s, the CCA laid out a strict and moralistic editorial code which published comics had to abide by to receive their stamp of approval: forbidding the glorification of crime and violence and the presence of nudity, smut or gore. Interestingly in the context of graphic medicine and disability representation, one of the CCA guidelines specifically forbade the portrayal of physical disability: "Special precautions to avoid references to physical afflictions or deformities shall be taken." [11]

The underground comix movement grew out of rebellion to this stifling environment in the 1960s and 1970s in the counterculture of San Francisco, which comix historian Patrick Rosencranz tracks in *Rebel Visions* (2008).[12] Primarily distributed through head shops[13] and adopting the appellation 'comix' to distinguish themselves from the mainstream comics industry and signify their adult content, underground comix embraced the "lurid, unsavory, gruesome illustrations" that the CCA sought to eliminate and became a bastion of psychedelic, transgressive, crude and political art. By building a platform where cartoonists could more freely and openly express themselves through their art, the underground comix movement became a rich source of confessional autography that inspired and shaped the next generation of cartoonists in the alternative comics movement and carved space for the

[11] ''The Comics Code of 1954 – Comic Book Legal Defense Fund'. (website), accessed March 7, 2025. https://cbldf.org/the-comics-code-of-1954/.
[12] Patrick Rosencranz. *Rebel Visions: The Underground Comix Revolution 1963-1975*. (Seattle, Washington: Fantagraphics Books, 2008).
[13] 'Youngsters of All Ages Free to Browse Among Hashish Pipes, Obscene Comic Books" - Mike Goodman - Los Angeles Times · Undercover Reporting', accessed March 7 2025. https://undercover.hosting.nyu.edu/s/undercover-reporting/item/13889.

modern landscape of autography. The next section of the thesis will focus on the seminal work of autography about mental illness in the underground comix movement: Justin Green's *Binky Brown Meets the Holy Virgin Mary*.

### 1.2: *Binky Brown Meets the Holy Virgin Mary*

> Before Justin Green, cartoonists were actually expected to keep a lid on their psyches and personal histories, or at least disguise them into diverting entertainments.[14]

Justin Green (1945-2022) was a cartoonist and sign painter who became a groundbreaking figure in the underground comix movement after his 1972 work *Binky Brown Meets the Holy Virgin Mary,*[15] a 44-page comic book which depicted his experiences and struggle with then-undiagnosed obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD) through the pseudonymised character and autobiographical avatar of Binky Brown. The reader follows Binky Brown from childhood to adulthood as he struggles with his obsessive compulsions that have mapped to Roman Catholic religious iconography, leading to moral scrupulosity and elaborate rituals to alleviate perceived sin. As Binky Brown goes through puberty he becomes fixated on his sexuality and genitalia as sources of sin, culminating in him visualising 'penis rays' emanating from his penis and eventually even his fingers, feet (Fig 1) and various phallic or genital-related daily objects which all have to be oriented in space so that the rays do not connect with an 'illicit vanishing point' such as a church, religious statue or other religious object. Binky continues to struggle with the dreaded rays through adolescence and into young adulthood, even after rejecting the Catholic Church. The

[14] Art Spiegelman. "Introduction: Symptoms of Disorder/Signs of Genius" in *Justin Green's Binky Brown Sampler,* Justin Green. (San Francisco: Last Gasp, 1995), pp. 4-6.
[15] Referred to as *Binky Brown* for brevity, where appropriate.

comic concludes with Binky purchasing and destroying 12 miniature statues of the Madonna to liberate himself from her influence.


**Figure 1:** Justin Green. *Binky Brown Meets the Holy Virgin Mary*. (San Francisco: Last Gasp Eco-Funnies, 1972), p.33.

*Binky Brown* is widely considered to be the first autobiographical comic about mental illness: underground comix historian Patrick Rosencranz writes that, while Justin Green was not the first cartoonist to insert themselves in their comics, "he was the first to openly render his personal demons and emotional conflicts within the confines of a comic."[16] Justin Green himself acknowledged that his work "anticipated the groundswell in literature about obsessive compulsive disorder by over two decades",[17] communicating the experience of living with a disorder that was poorly understood at the time. Comics scholar Hillary Chute argues that the comics form, with its rigid arrangement of space both inside and out of the panel, is uniquely suited to both show and replicate the relentless codifying of space that OCD often demands of its sufferers, making reference to cartoonist Alison Bechdel's 2006 autobiographical comic *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic,* where

[16] Patrick Rosenkranz. 'The ABCs of Autobio Comix | The Comics Journal', 5 March 2014, https://web.archive.org/web/20140305062916/http:/www.tcj.com/the-abcs-of-auto-bio-comix-2.
[17] Quote from Justin Green in Patrick Rosenkranz. 'The ABCs of Autobio Comix | The Comics Journal', 5 March 2014.

Bechdel recounts her childhood OCD and describes the process of comic making as a "barely harnessed obsessive compulsive disorder."[18]

The visualization of Binky Brown's psychic landscape, with hands and feet transforming into phalluses and emitting rays as in Fig 1 above, shows the unique potential of the medium of comics to show the complexity of individual internal realities in a form that is accessible and easy to understand. The reader is privy to the mind's eye of the autobiographical subject in a form that is raw and confronting – we see the physical presence of Binky's compulsions and the character's desperation as the authorial voice tells us that Binky's denial of the rays only serves to make them "more real" - as real as they appear on the page.

*Binky Brown* was deeply influential to Justin Green's peers in the underground comix movement. Art Spiegelman has stated that without *Binky Brown* there would be no *"*Maus" (originally published in *Funny Animals* in 1972) or "Prisoner on the Hell Planet*"* (originally published in *Short Order Comix #1* in 1973), which were later collected into his Pulitzer Prize winning graphic novel *Maus: A Survivor's Tale, Volume 1* in 1991. *Maus* is an autobiographical account of Spiegelman transcribing his father's experiences as a Holocaust survivor, drawing Jews as mice and Nazis as cats. "Prisoner on the Hell Planet" is a four-page comic Spiegelman wrote in 1972 about his mother's suicide, which appears within the story of *Maus* when Spiegelman's father Vladek discovers and reads it unbeknownst to his son. This autography sits in stark contrast to the visual language of the rest of *Maus* by showing

[18] Alison Bechdel as quoted in Chute. *Why Comics? From Underground to Everywhere*. "Why Illness and Disability?", p.9.

Spiegelman and his father not as mice avatars, but in human form in a harsh woodcut style (Fig 2 below).

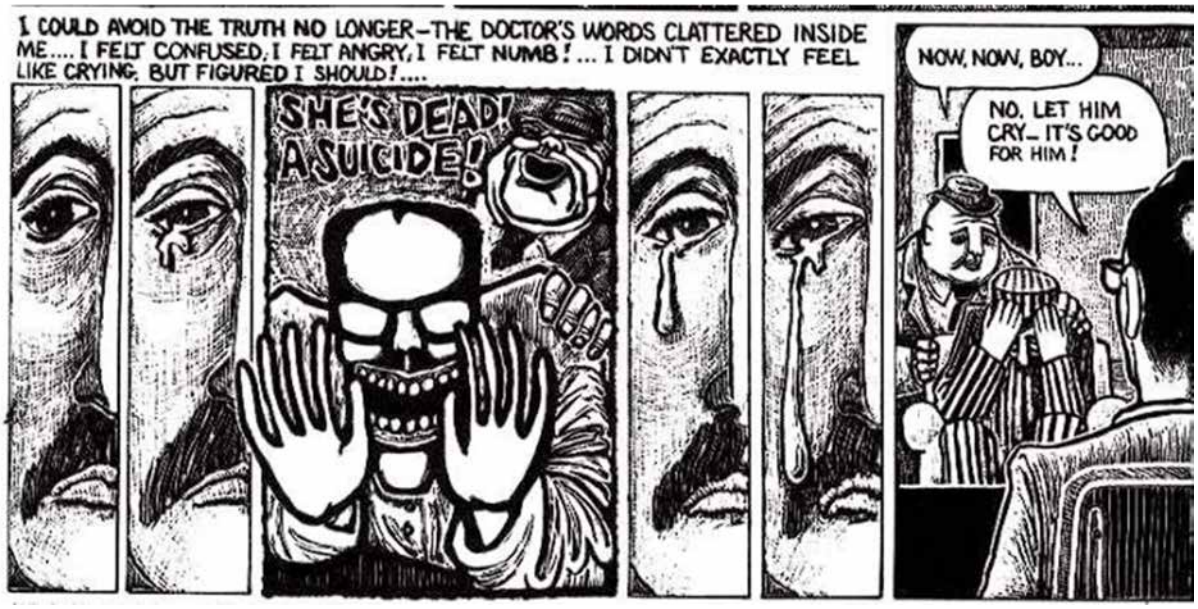


**Figure 2:** Art Spiegelman. "Prisoner on the Hell Planet". *Short Order Comix #1* (Head Press, 1973), p.2.

Andreas Huyssen notes this jarring departure and theorises that Maus would not have been as successful if it had maintained the human avatars of "Prisoner on the Hell Planet", believing that the story needed "a different, more estranging mode of narrative and figurative representation in order to overcome the paralyzing effects of a mimesis of memory-terror".[19] This idea of needing some departure or separation from the autographical avatar is present throughout the history of autography: in *Binky Brown* the allegorical story and its emotional truth is told through the fictional character of Binky Brown. In The Limits of Autobiography, Leigh Gilmore theorises that narratives about traumatic events fail to reach the reader when "…they expose the conflict between identification and representative-ness… Autobiography about

[19] Andreas Huyssen, 'Of Mice and Mimesis: Reading Spiegelman with Adorno', *New German Critique*, no. 81 (2000), p.73, https://doi.org/10.2307/488546.

trauma forces the reader to assume a position of masochism or voyeurism."[20] This voyeurism is made more digestible when the subject becomes more abstracted and universal, or when the emotional weight is couched in levity and absurdity.

This leads to discussion of the multiple representations of the autobiographical self in *Binky Brown.* The next section will focus on the Hanging Man, the autobiographical avatar which Justin Green draws in the opening page *of Binky Brown* and the role that this narrator takes - showing the multiplicity of the self and the authorial nature of observing one's own behaviours, particularly in the context of mental illness.

[20] Leigh Gilmore, *The Limits of Autobiography* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2001), p.22.

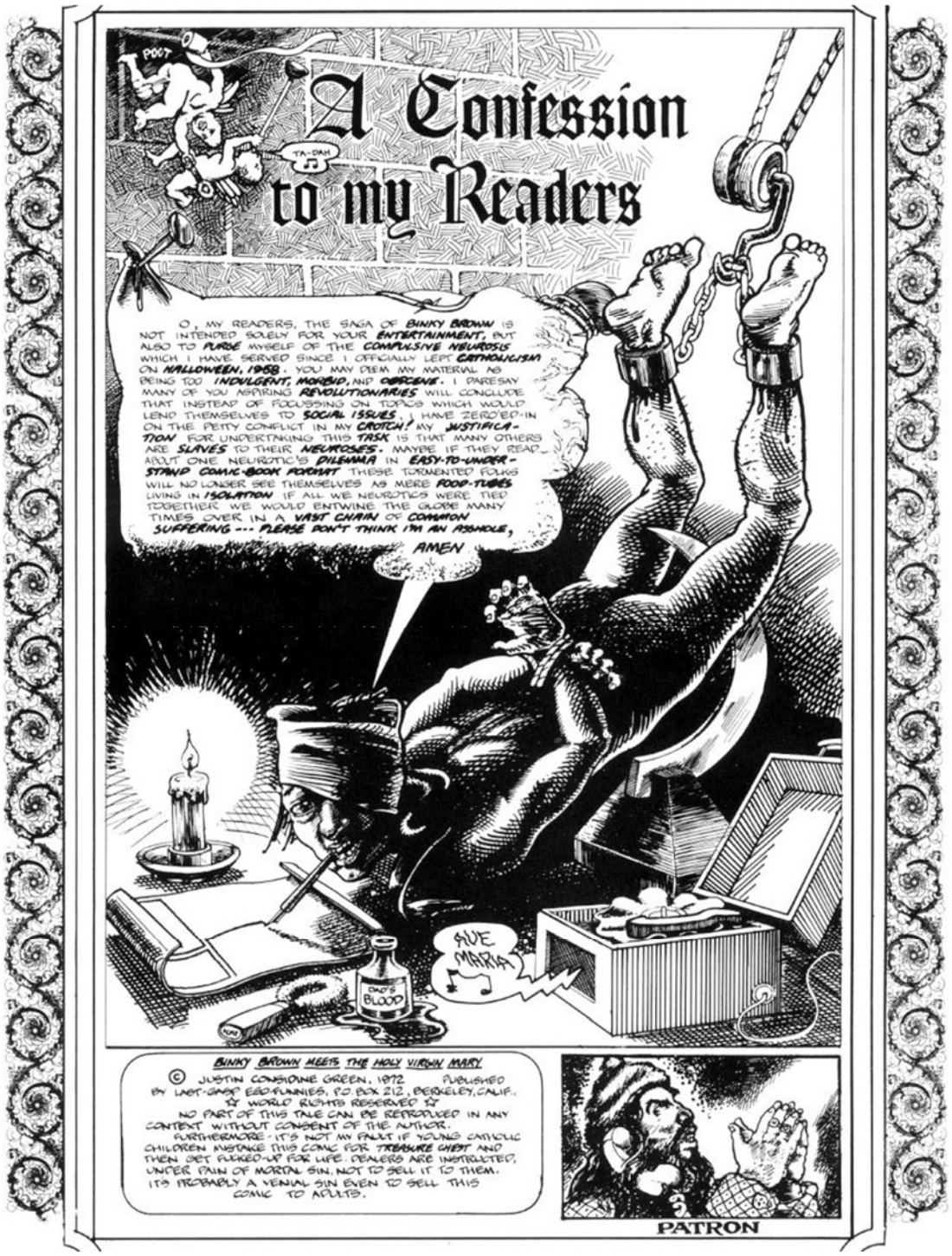


**Figure 3:** Justin Green. *Binky Brown Meets the Holy Virgin Mary*. (San Francisco: Last Gasp Eco-Funnies, 1972), p.1.
(Speech bubble text transcribed on page 19).

### 1.3: Narrating the Self in *Binky Brown*

In the opening page of *Binky Brown* (Fig 3) we see a graphic introductory tableau styled like a page of scripture and reminiscent in form and function of the Crypt Keeper's introductions in EC Comics' *Tales from The Crypt* (1950-1955). In it, the author has drawn a narrator he refers to as the Hanging Man[21] in hyperbolic religious flagellation: he is nude, bandaged and bound in rope and chains and hanging perilously above a sickle. By crosshatched candlelight, this tortured narrator offers justification for the confessional nature of his comic as he draws the panels with a pen clenched between his teeth:

> O, my readers, the saga of Binky Brown is not intended solely for your entertainment, but also to purge myself of the compulsive neurosis which I have served since I officially left Catholicism on Halloween, 1958. You may deem my material as being too indulgent, morbid and obscene. I daresay many of you aspiring revolutionaries will conclude that instead of focussing on topics which would lend themselves to social issues, I have zero'ed-in on the petty conflict in my crotch! My justification for undertaking this task is that many others are slaves to their neuroses – maybe if they read about one neurotic's dilemma in easy-to-understand comic-book format these tormented folks will no longer see themselves as mere food-tubes living in isolation. If all we neurotics were tied together we would entwine the globe many times over in a vast chain of common suffering – please don't think I'm an asshole, Amen.[22]

The Hanging Man, styled after the Hanged Man tarot card, therefore represents the authorial voice of the present. Like the character of Binky Brown himself: despite bearing little physical relationship to the author, the Hanging Man is intended as an autobiographical avatar representing an aspect of the author. The

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[21] Shaun Manning. 'Justin Green on "Binky Brown" - Comic Book Resources', 19 January 2015. https://web.archive.org/web/20150119062153/http://www.comicbookresources.com/?page=article&id=24518.

[22] Green. "Binky Brown Meets the Holy Virgin Mary", p.1.

comic being drawn by the Hanging Man is later clarified to be the very comic that we are reading (Fig 4), a placing of form within form that comics scholar Michael Chaney refers to as the *mise en abyme* (to place into the abyss),[23] a placing of a copy within a copy which is frequently used in autography as a "signal for the autobiographical mode."[24]

In "Autographics: The Seeing 'I' Of The Comics", Gillian Whitlock considers the autobiographical avatar(s) which an author uses to represent themselves in the story and the dissociation and abstraction between the author and their avatar(s), particularly in comics that represent traumatic experiences. Whitlock refers to Andreas Huyssen's analysis of Art Spiegelman's *Maus: A Survivor's Tale,* where the characters are abstracted from their true forms via transformation into mice and cats, an intentional distancing from the human form. Spiegelman is quoted as calling his representations of the forms "ciphers" and considers their abstraction "… a way to allow you past the cipher at the people who are experiencing it."[25] Huyssen continues by clarifying that the autobiographical avatars are not abstracted to divorce themselves entirely from their reality – but as a method of acknowledging that "the past is visually inaccessible through realistic representation"[26] and that representations of truth must be sought elsewhere. In the case of *Maus*, Art Spiegelman's diegetic recording and recounting of his father's story offers authenticity to the 'truth' of his narrative.

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[23] Michael Chaney. *Reading Lessons in Seeing: Mirrors, Masks and Mazes in the Autobiographical Graphic Novel*. (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2016), p.20.
[24] Andrew J. Kunka, *Autobiographical Comics*, Bloomsbury Comics Studies (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018), p.31.
[25] Interview conducted by Gary Groth, "Art Spiegelman and Franqoise Mouly," Gary Groth and Robert Fiore, eds., The New Comics (New York: Berkley Pub Group, 1988), pp.190-91.
[26] Huyssen. 'Of Mice and Mimesis: Reading Spiegelman with Adorno', p.76.

Justin Green offers a different kind of authenticity, saying in an interview with Patrick Rosencranz that "virtually every incident in the book is allegorical" and are intended instead to "…suggest or convey a whole generalized idea about some subjective feeling, such as order or fear or guilt."[27] This idea of finding emotional truth' in autography rather than attempting the task of objectively drawing reality to fit into the narrative structure of a comic is echoed by underground autobiographical cartoonist Phoebe Gloeckner:

> Comics are a narrative form, they have a narrative structure, which is all artifice. Life isn't like that. So you have to do so much manipulation of any set of facts or experiences to make them interesting or to make sense even to yourself. What you're after is not a set of true facts. You're after some sort of emotional truth, at least I guess I was, or just truth about what it is to be alive at whatever point.[28]

Gloeckner posits that objective truth is inaccessible in autography through the 'artifice' of its narrative structure and the 'manipulation' involved in the process of comics creation. Cartoonist Lynda Barry similarly muses on the truthfulness of autobiography in the comics form in her 2002 memoir *One! Hundred! Demons*!, drawing herself at her desk in the act of creation of the comic, wondering: "is it autobiography if parts of it aren't true? Is it fiction if parts of it are?"[29] This hearkens back to Michael Chaney's conception of the *mise en abyme* as a representation of the reflective form of autography: "The very act of holding up a mirror to behold the terrors it reveals about the self is shown to be essential to the game of misdirection played by both psyches and forms of representation like the comics."[30] The

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[27] Quote from Justin Green in Rosenkranz. 'The ABCs of Autobio Comix | The Comics Journal', 5 March 2014.
[28] Quote from Phoebe Gloeckner in the panel on Comics and Autobiography on May 19 2012, moderated by Deborah Nelson, as transcribed in *Critical Inquiry* 40 (Spring 2014), pp.86-103.
[29] Lynda Barry. *One! Hundred! Demons!* 3rd printing. Canada: Drawn and Quarterly, 2022. p.7.
[30] Chaney. *Reading Lessons in Seeing*. p.20.

authenticity that we find in *Binky Brown* therefore rests on the narration of the Hanging Man and the mirrors of the self that he and Binky Brown represent.

On page 36 of the comic the narrator refers to Binky as "our specimen", evoking a sense of this avatar being passively and scientifically observed rather than embodied or understood. Hillary Chute links this to the fragmentation and helpless observation of the self that OCD, and many other mental illnesses, create in their sufferers. Chute writes: "Green created a new form of comics self-expression that deliberately presents the autobiographical self as both a looking self (a subject) *and* a looked-at self (an object)."[31] The gulf between the looking self, here represented by the Hanging Man, and the looked-at self that the character of Binky Brown represents is palpable throughout. Fig 4 takes place near the end of the comic book, directly after Binky Brown smashes idols of the Madonna with a hammer to prove to himself that the figurines, and his compulsions, no longer have power over him. In the next panel Binky becomes exaggeratedly hirsute and muscular and proclaims, "the fuckin' rays vamoosed!" followed by a switch back to the perspective of the Hanging Man penning the comic laboriously through his teeth. The Binky being drawn admits "it's all up here!" and hits his head with the hammer as the Hanging Man struggles to finish the comic. This humorous exaggeration and sudden resolution implies that the Hanging Man and the author both understand the artifice of the narrative and that the tidy resolution of Binky's plotline is not a 'real' ending for their suffering. Rarely does the acknowledgement of mental illness spontaneously resolve its impact.

[31] Chute, *Why Comics? From Underground to Everywhere*. "Why Illness and Disability?", p.12.

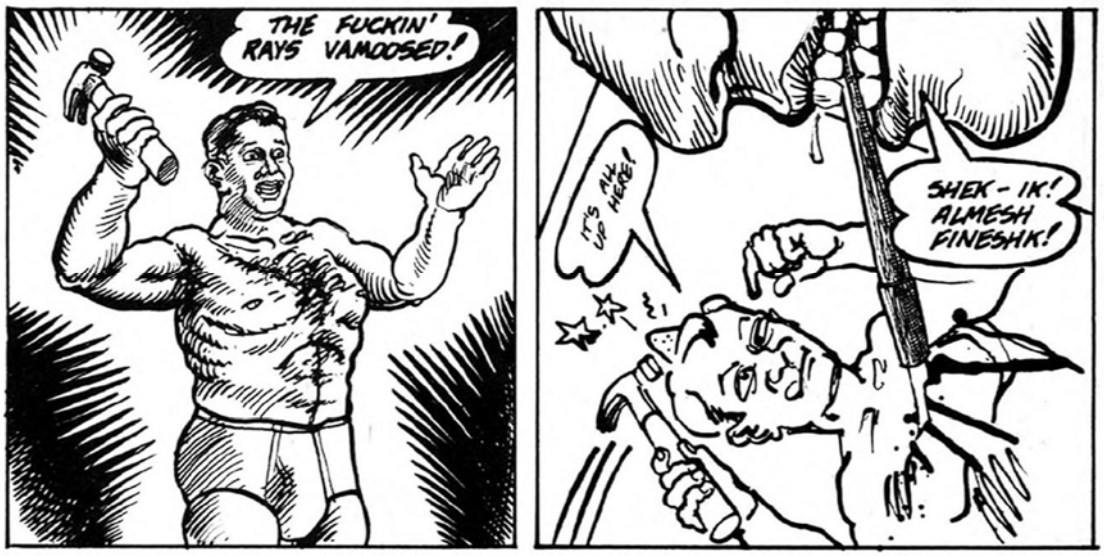


**Figure 4:** Justin Green. *Binky Brown Meets the Holy Virgin Mary*. (San Francisco: Last Gasp Eco-Funnies, 1972), p.41.

Jared Gardner makes a compelling case for how the autobiographical avatar of the Hanging Man accurately describes the labour and limitations of creating autography. The pen held between the teeth obfuscates both the Hanging Man's speech and the accuracy of translating an internal experience into a comic narrative. Justin Green represents his autobiographical avatar bound by the constraints of the medium as he is bound by his neuroses, with little hope that the process of testimony will free him from his chains. Gardner writes: "The question for the tradition of autography has long been, and remains, not whether the act of graphic memoir will set the autobiographical subject free (Green makes it very clear that it will not), but whether it will release him into a chain of common suffering, and whether that chain can be made to communicate, to bind one to the other."[32]

[32] Jared Gardner. "Autography's Biography, 1972–2007." Biography, vol. 31, no. 1, Dec. 2008, p.10.

Justin Green never became freed of his disorder by this process of testimony. In a 2022 article of remembrance for The Comics Journal, fellow cartoonist Bill Griffith writes about how Green *"...hoped doing the book would be an exorcism of sorts, freeing him from Catholic guilt. As he admitted to me many times over the years, that did not happen."*[33] However, the fact that *Binky Brown* inspired an entire genre of confessional autography is a testament to the linkage of this 'chain of common suffering'. Alongside Spiegelman, other prominent figures in the underground comix movement such as Robert Crumb, Aline Kominsky-Crumb, Phoebe Gloeckner and Carol Tyler directly trace their explorations in autography about their own neuroses and traumas back to the mode of representing the self that Green pioneered. By observing, lampooning and commiserating with the 'looked-at' version of the self to understand and communicate their experiences, these cartoonists created powerful visual and textual frameworks for autography. While this sort of testimony may not necessarily provide exorcism or catharsis for its individual creator, it can certainly create community and a deeper understanding of mental illness. In a 2012 panel on Comics and Autobiography in discussion with Green and her peers in comix autography, Phoebe Gloeckner opines that: "art is not therapy. It just makes you feel more connected to the world, perhaps, if you're lucky".[34]

[33] Bill Griffith in John Kelly's 'Remembering Justin Green'. The Comics Journal, 8 June 2022. https://www.tcj.com/remembering-justin-green/.

[34] Panel on Comics and Autobiography, May 19, 2012, moderated by Deborah Nelson. Transcribed in Hillary Chute and Patrick Jagoda, *Comics and Media: A Special Issue of Critical Inquiry*, Critical Inquiry 40 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014): pp.86-103.

### 1.4: The Laughter of Freedom: Humour in *Binky Brown*

> The Scientologists say that all humor comes from exclusion or embarrassment, but I think there is a third kind of laughter, which is the laughter of freedom. The laughter of sudden discovery that you're suddenly above or beyond a conflict that once blocked you in.[35]

In "What Makes Us Laugh? Verbo-Visual Humour in Newspaper Cartoons"[36] Elisabeth El Refaie contextualizes the three dominant strands of humour theories: superiority theories, release theories and incongruity theories. Superiority theories focus on humour evoked by the misfortune of others, considered from the lens of evolutionary psychology or as a means of social governance. Release theories consider humour and laughter as a release from tension, or in the Freudian context a "socially acceptable way of breaking taboos",[37] particularly around sexuality, aggression or other social inhibitions. Incongruity theories rely on the juxtaposition of different frames of reference or "semantic scripts",[38] where the humour arises from the incongruity of switching between contrasting frameworks, scripts, ideas or indeed drawings. While Refaie's study focuses particularly on newspaper cartoons, her analysis provides a framework for considering how these theories apply generally to the multimodal form of comics. All three theories of humour can be applied, often concurrently, to the examples of autography about mental illness discussed in this thesis.

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[35] Quote from Justin Green in Rosenkranz. 'The ABCs of Autobio Comix | The Comics Journal', 5 March 2014.
[36] Elisabeth El Refaie. 'What Makes Us Laugh? Verbo-Visual Humour in Newspaper Cartoons.' In *The World Told and the World Shown*, edited by Eija Ventola and Arsenio Jesús Moya Guijarro. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009. pp.75-88.
[37] El Refaie, 'What Makes Us Laugh? Verbo-Visual Humour in Newspaper Cartoons.' p.79.
[38] El Refaie, 'What Makes Us Laugh? Verbo-Visual Humour in Newspaper Cartoons.' p.80.

Humour is the dominant register in *Binky Brown*. The narrative voice lampoons the autobiographical avatar of Binky throughout: he is presented to us as a "specimen" to be pitied. His debilitating compulsions are presented as something ridiculous: the drawing in Fig 1 of Binky running nude as his feet and fingers transform into penises evokes absurdist humour as much as sympathy, which can be understood under the lens of superiority theories of humour. Justin Green's reference to the "laughter of freedom" at the beginning of this section can be considered under the framework of release theories of humour: by putting to paper the taboos and compulsions that plagued him in a light-hearted register they provide humour to the reader and acknowledge that the author is "above or beyond" this conflict.

Fig 5 below takes place after the child Binky learns about sexual intercourse from a friend telling a joke. The illustration inside his subsequent thought bubble could be considered an example of incongruity humour in how the aesthetically and contextually crude and childlike drawing style contrasts with the visually sophisticated art throughout the rest of the comic. The imagined speech bubble of "fArt" can be considered under the Freudian interpretation of 'taboo-breaking' release humour. Juxtaposing the text 'fArt' with the drawing of the nude figure indicates Binky's development from scatological humour, the most relevant and humorous social taboo to younger children,[39] to the adolescent humour that primarily deals with the social taboos around sex and nudity. As the narrator writes, this signifies that "the age of innocence is over". This use of a naïve drawing style combined with crude imagery to shift the tone of the narrative is seen throughout the history of autography

[39] Justin H. G. Williams. 'Why Children Find "Poo" so Hilarious – and How Adults Should Tackle It'. The Conversation, 2 February 2017. http://theconversation.com/why-children-find-poo-so-hilarious-and-how-adults-should-tackle-it-72258.

and appears again in this thesis in Fig 13 in Zoe Thorogood's *It's Lonely at the Centre of the Earth* (2022). The function of this humour in both contexts is to create a tonal shift that adds levity and absurdity to the serious topic of the narrative, functioning as a form of release humour for both the creator and reader.


**Figure 5:** Justin Green. *Binky Brown Meets the Holy Virgin Mary*. (San Francisco: Last Gasp Eco-Funnies, 1972), p.7.

# Chapter Two:

# From Underground Comix to Webcomics:

# Allie Brosh and *Hyperbole and a Half*

## 2.1: From Underground Comix to Webcomics

> Both in tackling taboo subject manner and in the often irreverent way that they do so, webcomic artists are following paths opened by Underground artists.[40]

The underground comix movement of the 1960s and 1970s and subsequent advances in comic autobiography in the 1980s and 1990s laid the groundwork for the confessional shape and style of autobiography in comics as they migrated to the digital landscape. In their essay Webcomics: The Influence and Continuation of the Comix Revolution, Fenty, Houp and Taylor consider the many ways in which webcomics have continued the legacy of underground comix in both form and distribution. The largely self-published nature of webcomics allows its artists to explore topics that traditional comics publishers might have vetoed: whether due to taboo subject matter or through fear of poor reception, as with underground comix. While it is not entirely free of the influence of the publishing industry or commercialisation, the more democratic landscape of the internet allows for a larger space and audience for comics that would have evaded the notice of the mainstream, with similar focuses on personal stories, social issues and counterculture.

Shannon Sandford argues that the culture of webcomics has specifically created new avenues for graphic medicine and autography about disability and illness to be disseminated and normalised: "If Underground Comix sought to engage and disarm taboos around sexuality, gender, war and addiction, then in a similar tradition, I argue, webcomics gesture towards the equally pervasive silencing around

[40] Sean Fenty, Trena Houp and Laurie Taylor, 'Webcomics: The Influence and Continuation of the Comix Revolution' – ImageTexT, accessed February 7, 2025. https://imagetextjournal.com/webcomics-the-influence-and-continuation-of-the-comix-revolution/.

experiences of disability, disease and mental illness."[41] Sandford's article focuses on Allie Brosh's *Hyperbole and a Half,* a hybrid blog and webcomic primarily active between 2009 and 2013[42] which included two blog posts tackling Brosh's experience with depression. Brosh's use of visual metaphor and humour to convey a difficult internal experience was extremely well received and praised by psychologists and depression sufferers alike.[43] The success of her blog led to it being translated into a New York Times bestselling book published by Square Peg in 2013. Brosh deepens her exploration of graphic medicine and treatment of illness and grief in her sequel, *Solutions and Other Problems,* published by Square Peg in 2020. This chapter will focus on the cultural context, representations of the self, humour and truth in the work of Allie Brosh.

### 2.2: *Hyperbole and a Half*

Allie Brosh began her online blog *Hyperbole and a Half* in 2009 while "procrastinating on studying for a physics final"[44] and gained a dedicated following for the juxtaposition of her humorous hyperbolic personal writing with seemingly crude sequential illustrations created in Paintbrush for MacOS, a rudimentary image editor and drawing program analogous to Microsoft Paint. Brosh's blog posts were inspired by various topics and situations from the author's life: the

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[41] Shannon Sandford, '"You Can't Combat Nothing": Allie Brosh's Hyperbole and a Half and Reframing Mental Illness Through Webcomics', *On Culture: The Open Journal For The Study of Culture*, no. 11 (2021): p.7. http://dx.doi.org/10.22029/jlupub-7139.
[42] Brosh briefly returned to the blog in 2020 to promote her second book *Solutions and Other Problems* (2020) but has not resumed posting blogs as of 2025.
[43] Robert T. Muller. 'Illustrating Mental Health With Cartoons'. Psychology Today, 2016. https://www.psychologytoday.com/ie/blog/talking-about-trauma/201611/illustrating-mental-health-cartoons.
[44] Allie Brosh. 'FAQ'. *Hyperbole and a Half* (blog). Accessed 24 February 2025. https://hyperboleandahalf.blogspot.com/p/faq_10.html.

'best of' panel that denotes some of the most popular posts on the website contains accounts of her misadventures as a hyperactive child, attempts to probe into the thought processes of her pet dogs and accounts of the author's minor struggles and pet peeves. The success of Brosh's art lay in its sheer expressive potential: the simplistic drawings belied a sophisticated understanding of exaggeration and comic potential. In the FAQ for the website Brosh writes: "I do that on purpose because shitty drawings are funny. I do work very hard on making my drawings exactly the way they are. Sometimes I revise one drawing over ten different times. It's a very precise crudeness."[45] This humour and expressivity is what makes Brosh's blog most effective in tackling serious topics like mental illness. The visual style of *Hyperbole and a Half* can be situated in the online culture of 'rage comics' that were contemporary to the blog.

### 2.3: *Hyperbole and a Half* and Rage Comics

In *Why Comics? From Underground to Everywhere,* Chute situates the inspiration of Brosh's art style in the internet culture of rage comics of the late 2000s and early 2010s. Rage comics, which originated on the imageboard website 4chan in 2008, were simple comics often depicting shared experiences composed of crudely but expressively drawn images, frequently drawn on basic drawing software like Microsoft Paint. The most successful of these were reproduced by other rage comic creators until they had formed a cast of stock characters with exaggerated features to express certain emotions and situations: the *commedia dell'arte* of late-00s internet culture. In a 2012 article for Ars Technica, Tom Connor notes that: "…the primary

[45] Allie Brosh. 'FAQ'. *Hyperbole and a Half* (blog), accessed February 24, 2025. https://hyperboleandahalf.blogspot.com/p/faq_10.html.

focus was always on creating faces that showed a recognizable emotion (as the name implies, this was typically rage) rather than on the quality of the artwork itself. The poorly drawn, expressive faces not only made the comics funnier, they communicated the characters' feelings in an easily understandable way."[46] Chute quotes Allie Brosh on seeing Rage Guy, a crudely drawn image of a cross-eyed character screaming in rage who became the central character of rage comics: "I don't know what it is about it, but it triggered something in me that made me want to start drawing again."[47] Brosh's source of inspiration in rage comics led to some of her drawings for *Hyperbole and a Half* themselves becoming part of the rage comic universe.[48] In 2025, rage comics are a relic of their time, lampooned for their naïve humour and continued only by a handful of devout loyalists.[49] However, their DNA remains embedded in internet culture and in the work of webcomics creators who bore witness to their era: of which Allie Brosh's *Hyperbole and a Half* remains a notable example.

### 2.4: Allie Brosh's Representations of the Self

The expressive potential of rage comics is explained through Scott McCloud's concept of amplification through simplification: "by stripping down an image to its essential "meaning", an artist can amplify that meaning in a way that realistic art can't."[50] Rage Guy isn't a drawing of a particular person expressing rage, it is an expression of rage made universal in its simplicity. The work of Allie Brosh on

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[46] Tom Connor, 'Fffuuuuuuuu: The Internet Anthropologist's Field Guide to "Rage Faces"', Ars Technica, 12 March 2012, https://arstechnica.com/tech-policy/2012/03/the-internet-anthropologists-field-guide-to-rage-faces/.
[47] Chute. *Why Comics? From Underground to Everywhere*. "Why Illness and Disability?", p.16
[48] *Know Your Meme.* (website) 'All the Things', 27 June 2011, https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/all-the-things.
[49] Luke Winkie, 'There Are Still People Making Rage Comics in 2019, Despite Everything', *Polygon* (blog), 30 July 2019, https://www.polygon.com/2019/7/30/20746981/rage-comics-reddit-2019.
[50] Scott McCloud, *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art* (New York: HarperCollins, 1993), p.30.

*Hyperbole and a Half* is influenced by rage comics in the way Allie Brosh draws her autobiographical avatar: a deeply emotive bug-eyed and noseless creature with a yellow triangle representing a ponytail and a tube-shaped pink body representing a dress, with stick arms and legs. The simplicity of Brosh's persona adds to the humour of her writing because of its physical malleability and distills the emotions she is trying to convey through its focus on exaggerated facial features, which is effective in her more humorous stories of childhood exploits and in adding levity and identification with more serious topics like those covered in 'Adventures in Depression'[51] and 'Depression Part 2'.[52]

Krista Quesenberry further explores the implications of Brosh's avatar as a distillation of expression devoid of other identifying characteristics such as race, gender or sexuality. This avatar would otherwise be made less understandable by the specific trappings of identity that a more realistic avatar would insert, distracting from the specific focus of the narrative: "a non-human self-representation eliminates some or all of the predictable identity markers in order to convey a reconstituted identity, particularly in comics about experiences of illness, disease and disability."[53] Quesenberry argues that by divorcing this avatar from questions of identity and exaggerating the facial features, the focus is drawn to understanding the emotion being conveyed, particularly in the context of Brosh's comics on depression.

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[51] Allie Brosh. 'Adventures in Depression'. *Hyperbole and a Half* (blog). October 2011. https://hyperboleandahalf.blogspot.com/2011/10/adventures-in-depression.html.
[52] Allie Brosh. 'Depression Part Two'. *Hyperbole and a Half* (blog), 2013. https://hyperboleandahalf.blogspot.com/2013/05/depression-part-two.html.
[53] Krista Quesenberry. 'Intersectional and Non-Human Self-Representation in Women's Autobiographical Comics'. *Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics* 8, no. 5 (3 September 2017): pp. 417–32. https://doi.org/10.1080/21504857.2017.1355831.

Brosh has frequently indicated in interviews that this autobiographical avatar represents "a more accurate way to represent (herself)." [54] She implies that this avatar is a truer representation of her interiority than a more realistic drawing could convey:

> I feel very awkward a lot, and so I want to represent myself with this awkward thing, this thing that doesn't quite look like a person. Maybe it looks like some sort of bug or some sort of alien, because that's how I feel. It helps when I'm trying to communicate how I feel to other people. It helps with setting the context and the tone.[55]

The physical estrangement from the human form therefore represents her internal sense of alienation and otherness, a common motif throughout mental illness autography.[56] This sense of alienation is particularly visible and impactful in 'Depression Part Two', where Brosh describes her difficulty in maintaining social interactions while dealing with the emotional deadening that often accompanies depression. In Fig 6, Brosh draws her distinctly alien-looking avatar contorting its face into a tilted grimace, attempting to mimic the appropriate emotional response in conversation. The forced expressions become more exaggerated and inappropriate as the conversation continues, eventually distracting her conversational partner. Though the primary intention of this segment is humour, it accurately conveys the alienating and isolating feelings of anhedonia.

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[54] NPR Staff. '"Hyperbole" Creator Considers All The Things'. *NPR*, 29 October 2013, sec. Author Interviews. https://www.npr.org/2013/10/29/240779810/hyperbole-creator-considers-all-the-things.
[55] Ailsa Chang. 'There's No "Convenient Structure To Life," Says Allie Brosh'. *NPR*, 22 September 2020, sec. Author Interviews. https://www.npr.org/2020/09/22/915685128/theres-no-convenient-structure-to-life-says-allie-brosh.
[56] El Refaie, *Autobiographical Comics*. pp. 62-65.


**Figure 6:** Allie Brosh. 'Depression Part Two'. *Hyperbole and a Half* (blog), 2013.

The self is frequently represented as multiple in Brosh's work, particularly in comics about internal experiences such as navigating mental illness. In 'Adventures in Depression', Brosh's internal critical voice is represented as a separate but identical avatar expressing anger and frustration at the primary external avatar throughout the narrative as they struggle with the inertia of depression (Fig 7). Sandford interprets that "…these images are divided into unequal halves that re-envision the fractured ill self as separate entities ('depressed' versus 'not-depressed Allie) in conversation".[57] An additional layer of multiplicity comes from the reflective and dryly humorous narrative text that punctuates the images: below Fig 7 in the blog post Brosh writes: "… trying to use willpower to overcome the apathetic sort of sadness that accompanies depression is like a person with no arms trying to punch themselves until their hands grow back. A fundamental component of the plan is missing and it isn't going to work."[58] Relating back to Hillary Chute's analysis of *Binky Brown* in section

[57] Sandford, '"You Can't Combat Nothing": Allie Brosh's Hyperbole and a Half and Reframing Mental Illness Through Webcomics'.
[58] Brosh, 'Adventures in Depression'.

1.3, the written text of *Hyperbole* here represents the "looking" self of the present while the drawn components represent the "looked at" self of the past.[59]

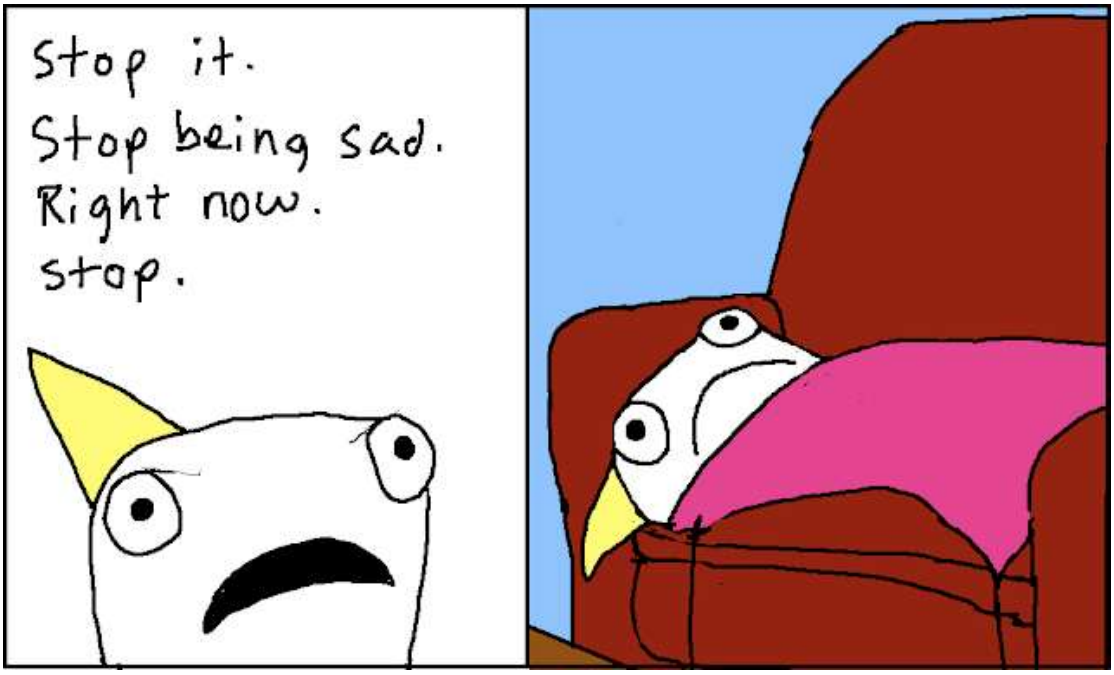


**Figure 7:** Allie Brosh. 'Adventures in Depression'. *Hyperbole and a Half* (blog), 2011.

This reconciliation of the conflicting internal processes of mental illness through personifying different aspects of the self continues throughout Brosh's work on depression: In 'Depression Part Two' Brosh recounts an anecdote of finding herself laughing hysterically upon seeing a piece of corn lying under a fridge after an extended period of depressive anhedonia. She interprets this internal process by drawing her brain as a separate malign avatar controlling the flow of emotion, saying: "you want to be happy?? FINE. I'll make you happy *to death*" (Fig 8).

[59] Chute, *Why Comics? From Underground to Everywhere*. "Why Illness and Disability?", p.12.


**Figure 8:** Allie Brosh. 'Depression Part Two'. *Hyperbole and a Half* (blog), 2013.

Brosh takes a consistently light-hearted approach to narrativizing and understanding the fragmenting experience of mental illness. Finding and sharing humour in difficult experiences is central to Allie Brosh's work. In 2013, the day before publishing 'Depression Part Two', Brosh eased back in from her 18-month hiatus to the blog with a 'transition post' explaining the content of the next post. Near the end, she writes a disclaimer reminiscent of Justin Green's 'laughter of freedom':

> In parts, it might get a little flinch-y and uncomfortable, and if I succeed in making you laugh during those parts, you're going to feel real weird about yourselves. But it's okay. Just let it happen. I WANT it to happen. Because it makes me feel powerful, and also because there are flinch-y, uncomfortable things everywhere. Seeing them is inevitable. If we can laugh about some of them, maybe they'll be less scary to look at.[60]

[60] Allie Brosh. 'Pre-Post Transition Post'. *Hyperbole and a Half* (blog). Accessed 27 April 2025. https://hyperboleandahalf.blogspot.com/2013/05/pre-post-transition-post.html.

### 2.5: Truth and Catharsis in *Hyperbole and a Half*

*Hyperbole and a Half* is a blog resistant to claims of truth in its title. When asked about the truthfulness of her stories, Brosh admits to hyperbole and exaggeration in her narrativization but stands by the core of her anecdotes: "I try to tell the story in the most entertaining and efficient way while still sticking pretty close to the truth."[61] However the authenticity of Allie Brosh's work lies squarely on its emotional truth and representation of the woven coexistence of tragedy and absurdity in the tapestry of daily life. In *Solutions and Other Problems* (2020), Brosh creates a sandwich of childhood misadventures, strange encounters and anecdotes either side of grief-laden autography about serious illness, surgery and the death of her sister. In conversation about the book with NPR, Brosh says: "I wanted (the book) to be a little bit more of a chaotic but real reflection of how these things actually felt. And the most authentic way I knew how to do that was by just trying to capture it and changes in tone in these ways where it's like, you know, you can have a moment of great hilarity followed by a moment of sorrow or the inverse."[62] In both *Hyperbole and a Half* and *Solutions and Other Problems* Brosh captures these emotional peaks and troughs and the moments of absurdity nestled within them.

Brosh has not spoken at length on the idea of catharsis through autography, but the subtext of her works on depression appears resistant to the idea: catharsis implies a relief through purgation, while Brosh's narratives focus on the cyclical, repetitive and absurd nature of living with mental illness. While both 'Adventures in

[61] Allie Brosh. 'FAQ'. *Hyperbole and a Half* (blog), accessed February 24, 2025. https://hyperboleandahalf.blogspot.com/p/faq_10.html.
[62] Chang, 'There's No "Convenient Structure To Life," Says Allie Brosh'.

Depression' and 'Depression Part Two' have a narrative resolution, they are not complete resolutions, nor do they imply the freedom of catharsis. Describing her experience of living with depression in an interview, Brosh employs another visual metaphor to describe its cyclical nature: "It's sort of like a thing that is maybe a tunnel, but also maybe a giant tube that just keeps going in a circle. And you can't tell which one it is while you're in it. There might be light, but there might just be more tube."[63] Brosh does not demand the certainty of a complete resolution in her illness narrative in the understanding that life rarely provides this certainty. As Sandford writes: "… a tube elicits an endless negotiation with mental illness that better encapsulates the sentiment of Hyperbole, whose author appears in perpetual recovery from, rather than cured of, depression and anxiety."[64]

[63] Catherine Gee. 'Hyperbole and a Half: How One of the Internet's Funniest Writers Finally Made It to Print'. The Telegraph, 29 October 2013. https://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/books/authorinterviews/10381487/Hyperbole-and-a-Half-how-one-of-the-internets-funniest-writers-finally-made-it-to-print.html.

[64] Sandford, '"You Can't Combat Nothing": Allie Brosh's Hyperbole and a Half and Reframing Mental Illness Through Webcomics', p.16.

# Chapter Three:

## Modern Mental Illness Autography:

## Zoe Thorogood and *It's Lonely at the Centre of the Earth.*

### 3.1: *It's Lonely at the Centre of the Earth*

> The evidenced growth in popularity and respectability of the genre collectively points towards autobiographical comics no longer being just a small press, DIY, underground entity; they are now notable works of socio-documentary-history.[65]

Zoe Thorogood is an English cartoonist who debuted in the comics industry in 2020 with *The Impending Blindness of Billie Scott,* a fictional graphic novel published by Avery Hill Publishing. After working on other comic projects at Image Comics, they published her autobiographical graphic novel *It's Lonely at the Centre of the Earth*[66] in 2023, which was received to great critical acclaim, including six Eisner Award nominations, the Russ Manning Newcomer Award and the Best Original Graphic Novel Ringo Award in 2023.[67]

Though *It's Lonely* is a traditionally published comic, Thorogood's work is situated in the culture of webcomics and microblogging that have shaped recent generations of cartoonists. Chloë Green uses the term "micro-webcomic"[68] to refer to the subgenre of webcomics found on current microblogging sites like Instagram which are self-contained and easy to consume. Autography about mental illness is a frequent subject of these micro-webcomics: many artists on Instagram have built their platform through sharing short comics or single-page cartoons documenting personal experiences and anecdotes frequently centring on mental health or illness, often with a

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[65] Chloë Green. 'Sequential Therapy: How the Autobiographical Comic Functions as a Therapeutic Tool for Creator and Reader'. Masters of Art, Leeds Arts University, 2023, p.9.
[66] Written as *It's Lonely* hereafter.
[67] ZoeThorogood.com. 'About Zoe'. Accessed 26 February 2025. https://zoethorogood.com/pages/about.
[68] Green, 'Sequential Therapy: How the Autobiographical Comic Functions as a Therapeutic Tool for Creator and Reader', p.10.

focus on fostering community through shared experience.[69] Thorogood sets *It's Lonely* in opposition to this, writing "I see a lot of comics about depression online, often trying to be palatable and relatable – and that's great, y'know? But… I don't often find my experience reflected in them."[70] Thorogood self-published her first autobiographical comic *Angel* on Gumroad in 2019,[71] a story about a suicide attempt which is redrawn and retold within the story of *It's Lonely*.

### 3.2: Representations of the Self in *It's Lonely*

> … autobiographical storytelling is drawn from multiple, disparate, and discontinuous experiences and the multiple identities constructed from and constituting those experiences.[72]

*It's Lonely* is a visually striking work of autography that utilizes various styles of cartooning to represent the multiplicity of the self through the fragmenting experience of mental illness. Thorogood layers her narrative with the meta-commentary of a host of autobiographical avatars representing different aspects of the self, rendered in different drawing styles reflecting their personalities and roles. The five main autobiographical avatars that appear throughout the novel are drawn on the title page in Fig 9 below. Thorogood externalizes her experience of depression and trauma as the looming dark figure named Happy, who follows her throughout the narrative as a largely silent presence, morphing in size and shape to represent her mental state. In a 2023 retrospective Q&A on *It's Lonely*, Thorogood talks about balancing aspects of horror and silliness when designing Happy: "I wanted him to be

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[69] Some specific examples include Ruby Elliot (@rubyetc), Clarice Tudor (@claricetudor), Holly Chisholm (@justpeachycomic) and Lize Meddings (@theofficialsadghostclub).
[70] Zoe Thorogood. *It's Lonely at the Centre of the Earth.* (Portland: Image Comics, 2022).
[71] Zoe Thorogood. 'Angel'. Gumroad. Accessed 8 April 2025. https://zoethorogood.gumroad.com/l/angelzt.
[72] Sidone Smith and Julia Watson. *Reading Autobiography*. 2nd ed. (Minneapolis, London: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), p.40.

this figure that you could kind of dampen… the most important part was that he looked uncanny and unsettling but the more time you spent with him, the more that lessened."[73] Beneath and to the left of Happy is the avatar Thorogood dubs the Teenager, a cynical and self-conscious antithesis to the Child avatar to the right of her. The Child – a separate concept from the avatar of Thorogood's child self, which also features significantly throughout the book and in its emotional climax - represents Thorogood's sense of idealism and optimism, drawn in a simplified 'chibi' style in the tradition of manga.

The primary avatar on the far right of Fig 9 represents the 'looked-at' version of the self that operates as the main character of the narrative. Significantly, the head of this more realistic avatar is frequently replaced with the head of the more simplified cartoon avatar behind her, which she dubs her 'Alter Ego' in a 2023 Q&A video about *It's Lonely.*[74] Also self-published in a collection of similar cartoons called *Brain Worms* (2022),[75] Thorogood's Alter Ego transitioned from a purely comedic character into an avatar through which the author could "express feelings in a very quick way",[76] reminiscent of Allie Brosh's intentionally abstracted and emotive avatar in *Hyperbole and a Half* and the McCloudian theory of amplification through simplification in cartooning.[77] As a separate avatar, the Alter Ego functions as a critical voice (Fig 12) and comic relief (Fig 13) throughout the novel. As a hybrid character with the primary avatar, the Alter Ego forms a shorthand for an aspect of the

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[73] Zoe Thorogood. *IT'S LONELY AT THE CENTRE OF THE EARTH: A Retrospective Q+A*. YouTube, 2023. 38:00 to 39:00, https://youtu.be/zE9APTkOMFg?t=2272
[74] Thorogood. *IT'S LONELY AT THE CENTRE OF THE EARTH*. 9:14 to 10:15, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zE9APTkOMFg.
[75] Zoe Thorogood [@zoethorogood]. 'FINALLY I'm Going to Be Self Publishing...' Tweet. *Twitter*, 10 October 2022. https://x.com/zoethorogood/status/1579484514166145024.
[76] Thorogood. *IT'S LONELY AT THE CENTRE OF THE EARTH*. 9:47 to 9:55, https://youtu.be/zE9APTkOMFg?t=588.
[77] McCloud, *Understanding Comics*, p.30.

self, divorced from the distractions of individual identity as with Krista Quesenberry's analysis of the autobiographical avatar in *Hyperbole and a Half*.[78] Throughout the narrative, the primary avatar switches between these more realistic and simplified modes of representation.


**Figure 9:** Title page of Zoe Thorogood. *It's Lonely at the Centre of the Earth*. (Portland, OR: Image Comics, 2022).

[78] In section 2.4 of this thesis, on page 33.

An interesting use of Thorogood's hybrid Alter Ego avatar can be seen in Fig 10 below. In this example, Thorogood describes an experience of meeting her fans at a comics convention, where the anonymous public shift from animal-headed avatars (which Thorogood uses to preserve the anonymity of other characters in the book) into mirrors of the Alter Ego avatar as they echo how "relatable" they find Thorogood's comics. Thorogood finds this attention and reflection alienating, later in the novel admitting: "I don't know how I can be 'relatable' when I feel like an alien in human skin."[79] The hybrid Alter Ego serves as both a mirror and a mask,[80] divorcing Thorogood's experience navigating mental illness from the gestalt of her lived experience, becoming an avatar that her audience can embody. As McCloud writes on the universality of cartoon imagery: "The cartoon is a vacuum into which our identity and awareness are pulled…We don't just observe the cartoon, we become it!"[81] The reflective symbology of the mirror is a constant presence in autography, one that recurs throughout *It's Lonely*.

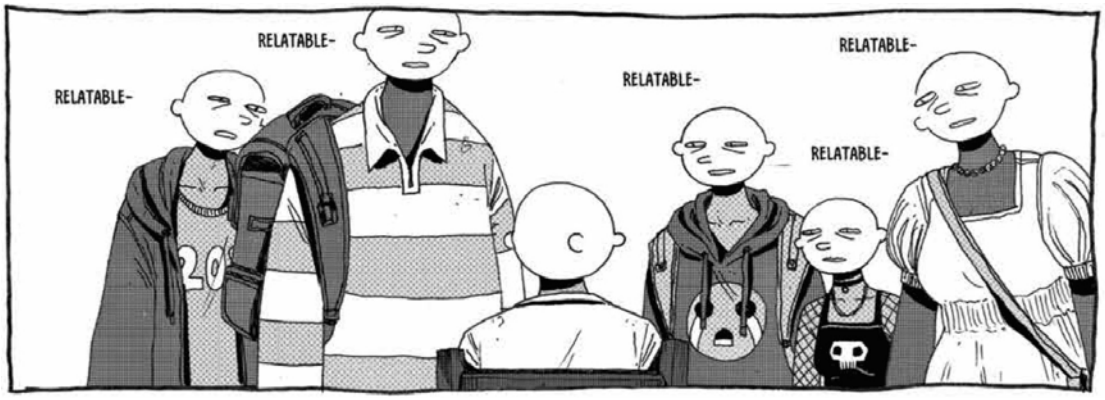


**Figure 10:** Zoe Thorogood. *It's Lonely at the Centre of the Earth.* (Portland, OR: Image Comics, 2022).

[79] Thorogood, *It's Lonely at the Centre of the Earth*.
[80] Michael Chaney further discusses the function of mirrors and masks in *Reading Lessons in Seeing: Mirrors, Masks and Mazes in the Autobiographical Graphic Novel*. (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2016), pp. 19-55.
[81] McCloud, *Understanding Comics*, p.36.

Just as the mirror is a constant presence in autography, visualisations of the child self are equally prevalent in autography and in autobiography generally. Hillary Chute writes "This emphasis on the child affords a conspicuous, self-reflective methodology of representation. It is a way to visibly represent the tension between the narrating "I" who draws the stories and the "I" who is the child subject of them." [82] Thorogood's avatar of the child self plays an important role in the narrative of *It's Lonely,* fostering a reflective, compassionate and individual mode of looking at the self. In a pivotal scene near the end of the book, Thorogood's child self appears in conversation with her adult self, smacking the jaded adult avatar with her portfolio of artwork and reinvigorating them with their shared passion for drawing and comics creation. In Fig 11 below, the adult avatar offers reassurance to the child self as they draw together, signifying a moment of self-compassion and healing.


**Figure 11**: Zoe Thorogood. *It's Lonely at the Centre of the Earth*. (Portland, OR. Image Comics, 2022).

[82] Hillary L Chute. *Graphic Women: Life Narrative and Contemporary Comics*. Gender and Culture. New York: Columbia University Press, 2010. p.5.

Thorogood acknowledges the creation of this scene as a moment of catharsis, citing it as "what the whole book ultimately was for." [83] However, like Green and Brosh, Thorogood does not expect this process of self-reflection and testimony to resolve her struggles: "…after making the book I wasn't fixed. I certainly felt better, I certainly have enjoyed the community that I feel now… But I'm still the same person."[84] Simultaneously, Thorogood acknowledges that developing a visual and textual vocabulary for interpreting, describing and communicating the fragmenting experience of mental illness has a therapeutic benefit for the author in addition to building understanding and community among its readers: **"**Art heals me, personally… things got better for me when I started expressing myself in ways that I could understand and communicate, and that, to me, is art."[85]

[83] Thorogood. *IT'S LONELY AT THE CENTRE OF THE EARTH*. 11:00 to 11:37, https://youtu.be/zE9APTkOMFg?t=672.
[84] Thorogood, IT'S LONELY AT THE CENTRE OF THE EARTH. 16:33 to 16:50, https://youtu.be/zE9APTkOMFg?t=992
[85] Thorogood, IT'S LONELY AT THE CENTRE OF THE EARTH. 36:43 to 37:12, https://youtu.be/zE9APTkOMFg?t=2204


**Figure 12:** Zoe Thorogood. It's Lonely at the Centre of the Earth. (Portland, OR: Image Comics, 2022).

### 3.3: The Fourth Wall and Truth in *It's Lonely*

> The comics form necessarily and inevitably calls attention through its formal properties to its limitations as juridicial evidence – to the compressions and gaps of its narrative (represented graphically by the gutterspace between the panels) and to the iconic distillations of its art.[86]

*It's Lonely* depicts, reflects on and questions its own creation through inventive use of the established visual devices of the comics medium and arguments between the multiple avatars of the self that Thorogood draws. Fig 12 above is one half of a two-page spread: it reveals that the room Thorogood's avatar is seated in is a film set where she is being recorded and criticized by the Alter Ego avatar, who is characterized throughout the graphic novel as a critical inner voice. This scene takes place directly after a page of tightly framed portrait panels in which the primary avatar of the author introduces herself as "…Zoe, cartoonist, and don't worry – this 4th wall bit will be over soon."

This avatar goes on to deliver a "gridded monologue" positioning herself and the narrative at the beginning of the six months of documentation, self-consciously justifying the autobiographical nature of the comic as an attempt to "see if I can figure any of **me** out" in the wake of an episode of suicidal ideation. The impulse to use comics to understand and reconstruct the self, particularly amidst the fragmenting experience of mental illness or trauma, is one that persists throughout the history of autobiographical comics: hearkening back to Justin Green's attempts to purge himself of his "compulsive neurosis" through *Binky Brown Meets the Holy Virgin Mary*. In their 2018 journal article focusing on the therapeutic potential of graphic medicine,

[86] Jared Gardner, 'Autography's Biography, 1972-2007', p.6.

Venkatesan and Peter state that "… comics creation facilitates the reconstruction of identity from fragmented lives by providing a sheltered space for individuals to negotiate and reflect on their past."[87] While the possibility of achieving catharsis through the creation of autography about mental illness is highly subjective, the search for understanding and order is undeniably a driving force for the creation of autography about mental illness and graphic medicine generally.

In the 2008 book *Theories of Performance,*[88] Elizabeth Bell discusses the concept of the frame: the conventions and boundaries through which we understand and contextualize experiences such as visual art (within the picture frame), theatrical performances (within the confines of the stage) or in this case the comic book, where it is understood that actions take place within the confines of the panels and the gutter between them marks the passage of time and space. In Fig 12 the characters break the frame within which the audience is expected to understand the narrative by drawing attention to the gutter: the frame in this instance. The border of the comics panel is used to reveal the fictional 'stage' of the comics page as the panel itself is revealed to be a film set. The black gutter serves as the edges of the set, where film equipment intrudes on the fictional reality of Thorogood's stage. The characters disrupt the presumed boundaries and internal reality of the comics page, both through their visual transgression and through their textual understanding of the medium they inhabit. The fourth wall, historically referring to the imagined frame that separates the characters on a stage from their audience during a performance, does not exist literally on the

[87] Sathyaraj Venkatesan and Anu Mary Peter, '"I Want to Live, I Want to Draw": The Poetics of Drawing and Graphic Medicine', *Journal of Creative Communications* 13, no. 2 (1 July 2018), p.106. https://doi.org/10.1177/0973258618761406.
[88] Elizabeth Bell, *Theories of Performance* (California: Sage Publications, 2008), pp.35-40.

comics page. It exists metaphorically as a separation of the comic narrative from the surroundings and mechanics of its creation, through its visual and textual dissociation.

In Fig 12, Thorogood borrows from the visual language of film to convey how the fourth wall is broken in this instance – we are pulled back to reveal the film set of the narrative, evoking a representation of documentary truth while itself being a false representation of the comics creation process. Instead of showing herself working at the drawing board or on the many rejected comic pages scattered across the stage of the studio, Thorogood draws her avatar delivering a rehearsed monologue in front of a green screen. This visually dramatizes the experience while evincing an emotional truth about Thorogood's experience with mental illness. On a previous page filled with white writing on a black background, Thorogood writes: "Zoe thought that maybe she never really wanted to kill herself. Sometimes it felt like a performance, a performance for no audience, but it felt like acting nonetheless."[89]
By using the verbo-visual tension of the comics medium and visualizing the metaphor of this 'performance', Thorogood brings the reader closer to understanding the emotional experience being discussed while visually acknowledging the medium's inability to truthfully and impartially represent reality.

The breaking of the fourth wall is a frequent device in the medium of comics, as a form particularly suited to reflexivity and metanarrative. Superhero comics - the predominant genre of American comic books – frequently contain characters who display awareness of their positioning in a comic. The academic Lucía Bausela Buccianti categorizes these in a 2023 article about fourth wall breaking in American

[89] Zoe Thorogood. *It's Lonely at the Centre of the Earth.* (Portland: Image Comics, 2022).

superhero comics.[90] Characters can address the reader directly and extradiegetically (outside of the narrative of the comic) to show their omniscience or provide context for the narrative.[91] Alternatively many characters (notably Marvel Comics' Deadpool) frequently display intradiegetic (existing within the comic narrative) self-awareness, largely for comedic effect. The last category of character self-awareness that Buccianti discusses is extramural[92] self-awareness, referring to instances where the characters are aware of the structure and creation of the work itself. Zoe Thorogood utilizes all three modes of self-awareness throughout *It's Lonely*, creating a narrative that is continually self-conscious of its own creation and reception.

Buccianti continues by noting instances of extramural self-awareness where "…comic characters ascend to their creators' ontological level, or, more precisely, to the fictionalization of the creators' reality."[93] The concept of fictionalizing reality is key here: the reader understands that the avatars of Zoe Thorogood that are represented on the comic page are not the author's physical, literal selves – they are drawn avatars simulating conflict with each other. These established conventions for metafiction in the tradition of American superhero comic books have different implications in the context of comics presented as autobiography. In comics autobiography the self is unavoidably fictionalized and placed into the narrative of the comic, which raises questions about how they can be represented as 'truthful'

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[90] Lucía Bausela Buccianti. '"Fourth-Wall Breakiness or Whatevs": Presumed Self-Awareness in American Superhero Comics'. *The Journal of Popular Culture* 56, no. 3–4 (2023): pp.673–88. https://doi.org/10.1111/jpcu.13266.

[91] This narrative device is prominent throughout the history of comic books – in Fig 3 of this thesis, the character of the Hanging Man introduces us to the story of *Binky Brown Meets the Holy Virgin Mary* in a parody of the Crypt Keeper, EC Comics' extradiegetic narrator and host of *Tales From the Crypt* (1950-1955).

[92] Buccianti adapts this phrase from Linda Hutcheon's *Narcissistic Narrative: The Metafictional Paradox* (Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1980).

[93] Bausela Buccianti, '"Fourth-Wall Breakiness or Whatevs"'.

autobiography, and whether truth is relevant in the study of comics autobiography. In a 2023 retrospective Q&A video, Thorogood herself acknowledges how the narrativization process distances the self from the autobiographical avatar, saying that *It's Lonely* became a "more fictional story of a real person intertwining with this fictional version of themselves."[94] In Thorogood's conception, the narrative and presentation of the self in autobiographical art is highly influenced by the artist's internal perception of the self, and therefore: "there is no possible way to create a 'true' autobiographical piece of art."[95]

### 3.4: Humour in It's Lonely at the Centre of the Earth

*It's Lonely* weaves emotionally heavy and visually intricate depictions of living with depression with the unromantic reality and absurdity of it, primarily through switches of drawing style and tone throughout the narrative. Early in the comic, Thorogood draws her primary avatar working on another writer's comic (Joe Hill's *Rain* (2022) and writes about taking refuge in the artistic process of "transforming ink into emotion that can be comprehended and felt by others".[96] The romance of this idea is contrasted by the indignance of reality outside of the creative process: "…I'm no longer a vessel of larger concepts. I'm a vessel of meat and piss."[97] The unromantic reality of being a "vessel of meat and piss" is compounded visually by the drawing on the following page, seen as Fig 13 below. As in the Binky Brown example in Fig 5, there is a stark contrast between the sophisticated cartooning

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[94] Thorogood. *IT'S LONELY AT THE CENTRE OF THE EARTH*. 17:55 to 18:15, https://youtu.be/zE9APTkOMFg?t=1077
[95] Thorogood. *IT'S LONELY AT THE CENTRE OF THE EARTH*. 19:45 to 20:30, https://youtu.be/zE9APTkOMFg?t=1221
[96] Thorogood, *It's Lonely at the Centre of the Earth*.
[97] Thorogood, *It's Lonely at the Centre of the Earth*.

on the previous pages and the naïve art style Thorogood uses for her Alter Ego avatar. Thorogood cites the work of David Shrigley as the inspiration for this Alter Ego: a British visual artist and cartoonist who has received critical and commercial success by juxtaposing naïve paintings and line drawings with crude, philosophical or satirical text that evokes humour through their incongruence.[98]

The example of Zoe Thorogood's Alter Ego avatar in Fig 13 below evokes humour through release and incongruence. The immediacy and irreverence of the drawing of this carefree avatar on a skateboard labelled 'PISS' is incongruent with both the serious and confessional tone of the previous pages and the sentiment expressed on his t-shirt: "thinking about boobs and killing myself". Similarly to the tone-shifting example of cruder drawing in *Binky Brown* in Fig 5, this cruder representation is used to explore release humour through the shifting of inhibited taboo thoughts. The juxtaposition of "thinking about boobs" with suicidal thoughts shows the absurd and mundane reality that living with suicidality becomes.

[98] Jonathan Jones. '"A Lot of My Work Has This Insane Anxiety about It": David Shrigley on Worrying, God and Drawing like a Five-Year-Old'. *The Guardian*, 25 October 2022, sec. Art and design. https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2022/oct/25/david-shrigley-interview-get-your-shit-together.


**Figure 13:** Zoe Thorogood. *It's Lonely at the Centre of the Earth*. (Portland, OR. Image Comics, 2022).

Chronic illness, and chronic mental illness particularly, is often a deeply unromantic and absurd experience. In an interview with RJ Casey for The Comics Journal, contemporary chronically ill cartoonists Rebecca Kirby and Grant Ionatán eschew the "two-dimensional" idea that chronic illness narratives must be presented as either tragedy or inspiration: "our circumstances can be both really upsetting and also very funny… Tons of comedy is based off the expense of someone's dignity. It

also extends to this experience."[99] This links to superiority theories of humour, where amusement is generated from the misfortune of others. Humour in illness autography also frequently makes use of release theories: joking about a potentially traumatic or difficult experience, or thoughts considered taboo such as suicidality, can relieve the pressure of inhibiting these thoughts. Finally, autography about mental illness makes use of visual and/or textual incongruity to find absurdist humour in the experience, in search of Justin Green's 'laughter of freedom'.

[99] Rebecca Kirby in RJ Casey. 'They Are Escaping the Hospital and Are Going to Kill Their Captors: A Conversation with Rebecca Kirby and HTML Flowers'. *The Comics Journal* #305, Health Care, Disability, Illness & Comics (Winter-Spring 2020): pp. 16–53.

# Conclusion

Autography about mental illness has a rich history in comics and will continue to be an area of focus for cartoonists and scholars alike. The medium of comics is adept at externalising subjective internal experiences through its verbal and visual hybridity. In this thesis, select works of autography about mental illness from throughout the history of comics were examined in the context of their multiple representations of the self through their autobiographical avatars, their conception of 'emotional truth' in autography and their use of humour as a tool for adding levity and emotional clarity to their depictions of the experience of living with mental illness. The cultural context of each work of autography was also considered and examined in how it shaped the form, distribution and content of the work. The idea of achieving catharsis through autography about mental illness was examined in the opinions of the selected authors: none of whom were relieved of their burdens by the process of this testimony alone but developed a vocabulary to describe internal experiences that could be shared with others. Hillary Chute writes: "Putting one's experience into little boxes in space doesn't lend itself to the purging implied by catharsis. It's like building a visual, material, counter-edifice to express a mental edifice, a mental structure."[100] This concludes that while the idea of catharsis is incongruous with the laborious practice of making comics, the experience of externalising and narrativizing personal experiences can provide clarity to the author and identification with the reader, adding another link in Justin Green's "chain of common suffering".

[100] Hillary Chute. *Why Comics? From Underground to Everywhere*. 'Why Illness and Disability?' p.9.

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