

MAMAHOOD: COMIC ADVENTURES IN QUEER PARENTING

by

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for the degree of Master of Fine Arts in Interdisciplinary Arts, Media, and Design

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ABSTRACT

This thesis combines graphic narrative and formal comics scholarship in book form. It explores the cultural norm of “good mother” and the role of comics as popular storytelling in shaping and expressing this norm, by situating a series of comic case studies of motherhood in conversation with the author’s own motherhood journey, told as an autobiographical graphic narrative. Ultimately, this project seeks to further broaden the range of mother icons available to those who take up or find themselves parenting as mothers and to challenge the sometimes oppressive weight that familiar images of “good” mothering can lay on their (our) shoulders.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Sincerest thanks to my first comics teacher, Fiona Smyth. All of my confidence in myself as a cartoonist is borrowed from the confidence you had in me. And to Anthony Harrison, whose voice I hear going “don’t be afraid of those solid blacks!” every time I put a page together.

Thanks to my advisors, Michelle Miller and Shea Chang for never once rising to the bait when I sent you a draft and said “you can look at this but I already know it’s terrible and I’m sorry”, and for pushing me to make better work than I imagined I could.

Thanks to scholars Peter Morin, Aylan Couchie and Ali Quesk, for their generosity and guidance on engaging with Indigenous knowledges.

To my family, for tolerating two years of me carrying on like I was the first person ever to do a Masters degree.

And to the magical Aunties – mine and my children’s – who always seem to know when I’m stuck up a tree and arrive to rescue me. (Stephanie I love you but that is NOT a reasonable number of sour patch kids to give a seven year old!)

DEDICATION

For Alice (obviously).

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I TRIED REALLY HARD
TO BE SMART, SMART, SMART
IN THAT TRADITIONAL WAY
OF BEING SMART.

- LYNDA BARRY

FOREWORD

I became a parent willingly. In fact, we had to work pretty hard to make our family. I adore my children, find them endlessly fascinating, experience deep joy at the mere fact of their existence. I am deeply in awe of my wife for gracefully and straightforwardly enduring the process of making them. I care about doing a good job for them – all three of them – more than I knew it was possible to care about something. Imagine my dismay, then, when I found my sense of self completely erased by spending time in the role of “mother”. This job is demanding in a way that leaves little-to-no room in the day to pursue anything else. And yet, while moving through the world of early childhood spaces I was constantly reminded of the ways I was different from the mothers around me, constantly compelled to present myself to the gatekeepers of these spaces, and constantly asked – both subtly and directly – to validate my claim on motherhood. I was adrift, disoriented, and under more pressure not to screw up than ever before. Despite these feelings of alienation, I went weeks without ever speaking to another person about a topic other than childcare. I would often remark to my wife at the end of a long day “I feel like I’m not even a person.”

Gradually, the practice of drawing myself and my family emerged as a way to reassure myself of my own humanity. I have always loved comics as a reader and studied them as a student, now I began to make them. This required me to ignore the internal voice telling me I would never draw well enough to be a comic artist, several years of night classes, and a truly ridiculous amount of external validation from my teachers, my wife, and on social media. I leaned hard on the one *hundred* percent effective and healthy coping mechanism (no follow up questions) of cracking jokes – gently, but at my own expense – about my experience of motherhood.

My practice of creating small, wryly humorous, exaggeratedly emotional comic strips about my daily life began in 2020. This was a project of *sense-making*, as much as a message in a bottle cast out in search of community, connection,

¹ Chute, *Outside the Box*, 59.

and (let's be honest) attention. The four-panel gag strip was the perfect vehicle for my explorations – a practice of creating short strips is practically accessible and logistically available to a busy parent who can only steal moments with a sketchbook on their knee. It's been something I could work on and keep moving and progressing during the years where my children's material needs devoured the bulk of the hours each day. Comics have always occupied a specific place in the public imagination – “Comic strips constitute an imagined reality which bears consequences for the real... comic strips do more than simply reflect society, they help shape it.”² I was attempting to harness the power of comics to say “hey! Look at me! I'm *actually* just like you, but also different in ways it would be nice that you noticed!”

Five years into this project of autobiographical comics, I'm ready to move beyond the gag strip into an exploration of something deeper, broader, and more complex. There has been an emergence of graphic memoirs by women, with artists like Marjane Satrapi (*Persepolis*, *Embroideries*), Alison Bechdel (*Fun Home*, *Are You My Mother?*), and Lynda Barry (*One! Hundred! Demons!*, *My Perfect Life*) at the vanguard. Hillary Chute points to the recasting “of the female subject as both an object of looking and a creator of looking and sight”³ as a defining, possibly driving, factor of this trend. Graphic novels are imminently accessible, but can express infinite complexity, explore tender and serious subjects, and delve into politically charged discourses. The vast, idiosyncratic toolkit of the comic artist offers me a language that feels elastic enough to grapple with these questions of identity, and in doing so, to share my (still ongoing) story of becoming a mother. If we are the stories we tell ourselves, what better way to reconstruct the self I'd lost than to “materially reimagine” myself through comics?

I have always been called stubborn. Through the lens of autism this is called “rigidity”, through the lens of gender this is called “non-conforming”. Through a social lens it's been called “misfit”, “weirdo” and “nerd”. But I am not able to change myself enough to fit the definition of “mother” as I understand it. I am also unwilling to cede my claim on the title. So the only option that remains is to push at the boundaries of that definition until they expand to include me. In the words of writer Richard Wagamese, we tell stories “not to tell people how to think and feel and therefore know—but through our stories allow them to discover questions within themselves.”⁴ I want my story to broaden people's understanding, and maybe even change their minds, about what a mother is. I want people who are like me to see themselves reflected, and I want people who are not like me to make room for us. Quite a burden to place on a series of silly little cartoons, but I have learned not to underestimate the power of a good story. Now I just have to tell one.

² Kirtley, *Typical Girls*, 3.

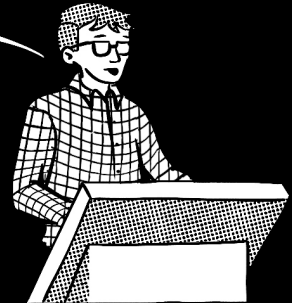
³ Chute, *Graphic Women*, 2.

⁴ Wagamese, *Embers: One Ojibway's Meditations*, 95.



Change, Part One: Metamorphosis

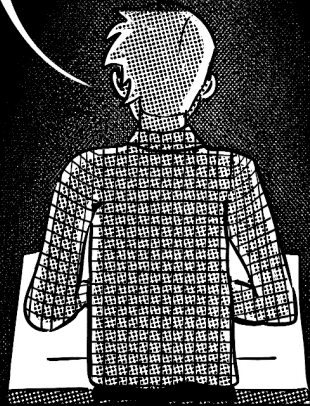
THE PROCESS OF
ANIMAL AND INSECT
METAMORPHOSIS HAS
FASCINATED SCIENTISTS,
AUTHORS AND ARTISTS
FOR MANY YEARS.



FROM LUCIUS APULEIUS'S SECOND CENTURY TALE
OF THE GOLDEN ASS, TO KAFKA'S GREGOR SAMSA
AWAKENING ONE MORNING AS A MONSTROUS
COCKROACH, TO THAT 2017 EPISODE OF RADIOLAB
THAT MADE EVERYONE THINK CATERPILLARS
DISSOLVE COMPLETELY INTO GOO (THEY DON'T),
METAMORPHOSIS-AS-METAPHOR HAS GRIPPED OUR
COLLECTIVE PSYCHE WITH A THRILLING SUGGESTION
THAT ANYTHING IS POSSIBLE IF ONLY WE EMBRACE
CHANGE WHEN IT COMES, AND GIVE OURSELVES
OVER TO DISSOLUTION...



THE SEEDS OF THE BUTTERFLY'S FORM EXIST WITHIN THE
CATERPILLAR FROM BIRTH IN THE FORM OF "IMAGINAL DISCS" -
SHELTERED LITTLE CELL CLUSTERS, PROTECTED WITHIN THE BODY
OF THE CATERPILLAR, FROM WHICH THE BODY OF THE BUTTERFLY
WILL ASSEMBLE ITSELF. AND WHILE THE OXFORD ENGLISH DICTIONARY
ARTLESSLY DEFINES "IMAGINAL" AS "OF OR RELATING TO THE ADULT
FORM OF AN INSECT" (BORING) THE POETS AMONG US CAN...



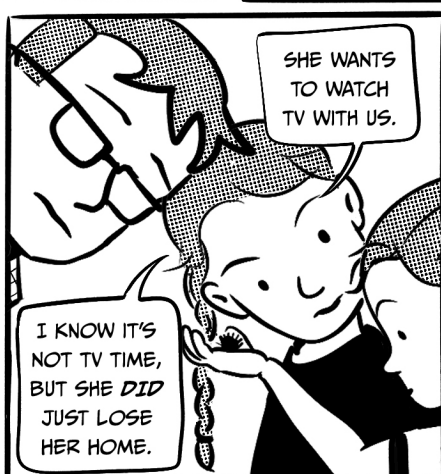
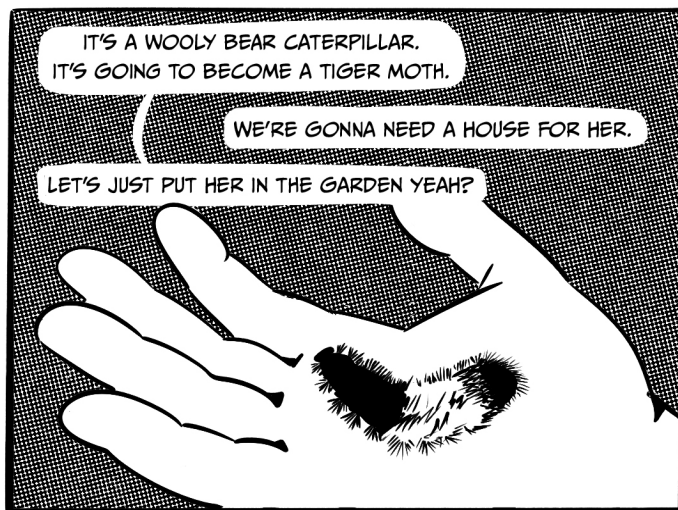
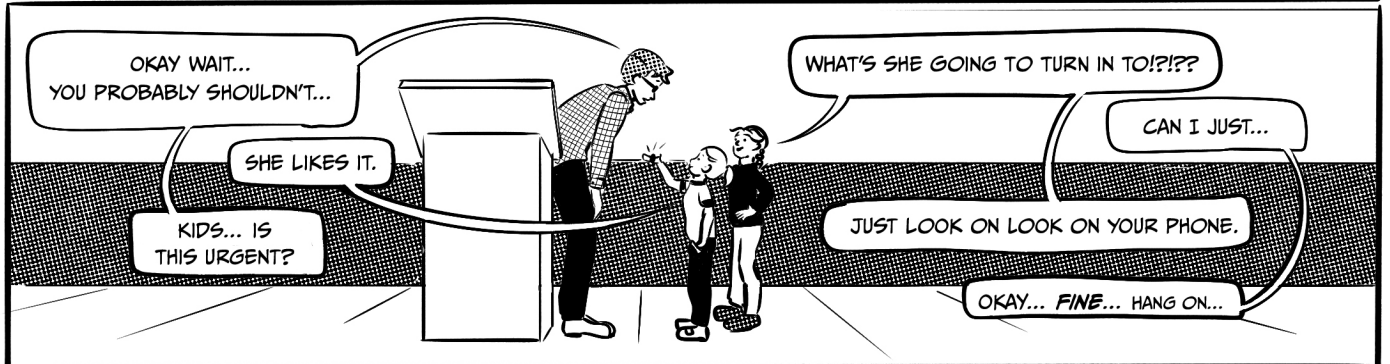
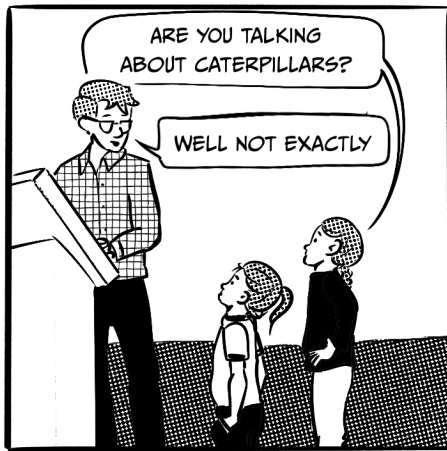
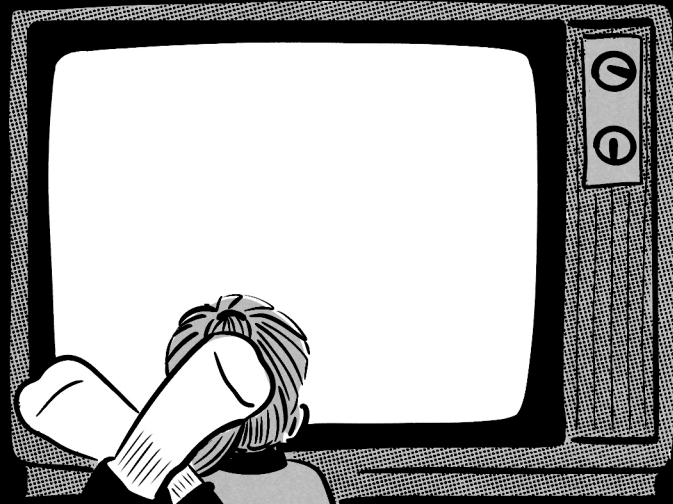


Figure 1. Comic, "Change Part One: Metamorphosis", by Amy Noseworthy

INTRODUCTION: ASSUME THE POSITION (ALITY)

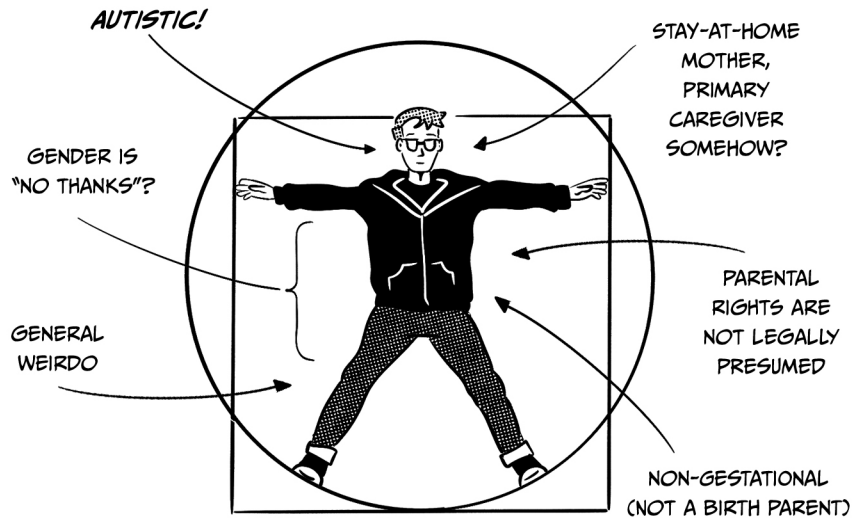
GROWING UP,
I USED TO GET REALLY
ATTACHED TO
CHARACTERS ON TV.

I'M AUTISTIC.
A LOT OF HOW
I PRESENTED MYSELF
SOCIALLY WAS BY
COPYING WHAT I SAW
IN TV SHOWS.



LOOKING BACK,
IT'S PLAIN TO SEE MY
ENTIRE PERSONALITY WAS
"80S SITCOM TOMBOY".

OCCUPYING A
CAREFULLY-CONSTRUCTED
STEREOTYPE HAS ALWAYS
BEEN THE WAY I MOVED
THROUGH THE WORLD.
I MISTOOK THESE
CHARACTERS FOR AN IDENTITY
FOR A LONG TIME.

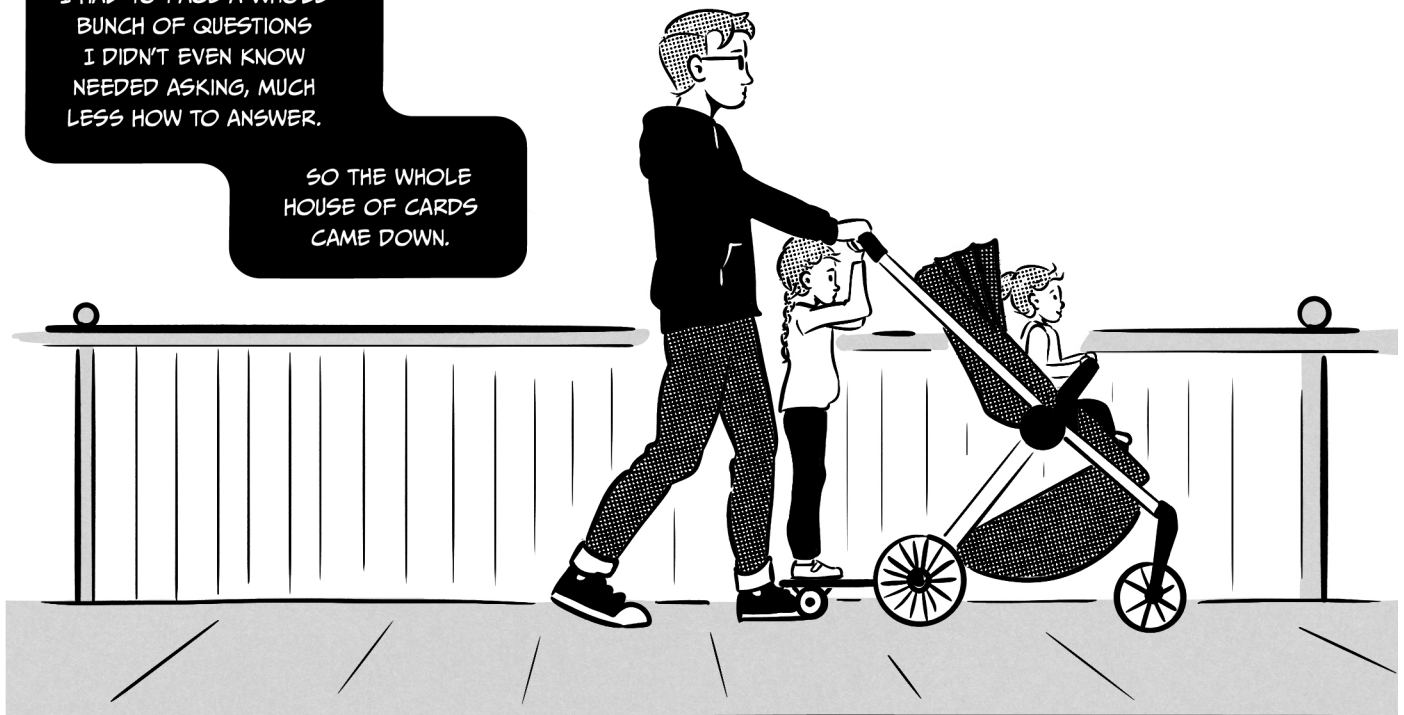


WHEN WE HAD KIDS,
THE *MISMATCH* BETWEEN
THE CHARACTERS I COULD
OCCUPY AND THE CHARACTER
I WAS *EXPECTED* TO BE
CAUSED ME NO END OF
TROUBLE.

THE RESULTING
DISORIENTATION
WAS INTENSE.

I HAD TO FACE A WHOLE
BUNCH OF QUESTIONS
I DIDN'T EVEN KNOW
NEEDED ASKING, MUCH
LESS HOW TO ANSWER.

SO THE WHOLE
HOUSE OF CARDS
CAME DOWN.



BUT...

HAVING CHILDREN MEANS YOU CANNOT SPEND TIME AS A PILE OF CRUMPLED CARDS
ON THE FLOOR. SO HERE I AM, REBUILDING THE HOUSE, AND FACING THE QUESTION:

IN WHAT WAY IS MY SELFHOOD BEING SHAPED BY THE *OVERARCHING*
CULTURAL NORM OF THE "GOOD MOTHER", AND WHAT DOES THIS
MEAN FOR ME AS A QUEER, NON-BINARY, NON-GESTATIONAL, AUTISTIC,
PRIMARY CAREGIVER TO TWO CHILDREN? WHAT DOES THIS MEAN
FOR OTHER *NON-NORMATIVE* PARENTS? AND, IF NEITHER SOCIAL,
BIOLOGICAL, NOR LEGAL MARKERS OF MOTHERHOOD ARE
AVAILABLE, WHAT CAN I MAKE *MOTHERHOOD* OUT OF?

COULD THE
ANSWER BE
CARTOONS!?

ONE THING I LEARNED EARLY ON WHILE BEING A LESBIAN WITH A KID IS THAT PEOPLE ARE USUALLY TRYING TO FIGURE OUT HOW SOON AFTER MEETING YOU THEY CAN START ASKING

SUPER INVASIVE QUESTIONS!

SOMETIMES THEY'LL START WITH A MISDIRECT, DESIGNED TO APPEAR INNOCUOUS IF NECESSARY.



SOMETIMES THEY DIVE RIGHT IN.



I NEVER KNEW HOW TO RESPOND. I WOULD PRACTICE ANSWERS IN MY IMAGINATION, LYING AWAKE AT NIGHT.



IN REALITY, I USUALLY JUST MUMBLED...



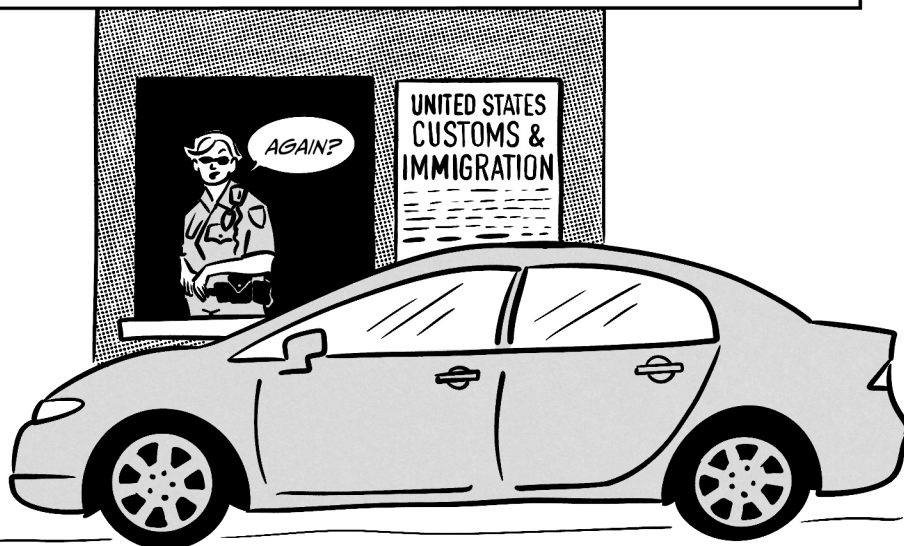
AND IT'S OKAY. PEOPLE'S CURIOSITY WAS A LOT BUT I RECOGNIZE IT WAS ALSO A WAY TO INVITE ME INTO THE CONVERSATION THEY WERE HAVING, DESPITE THE DIFFERENCES IN OUR EXPERIENCES. IT WAS A WAY OF SIGNALING THAT THEY WERE OKAY WITH ME BEING ONE OF THEM, WHICH I GET IS NICE, BUT ALSO SO, SO COMPLICATED AND BITTERSWEET...

GIVEN ALL THAT, BEFORE WE GO ON, I'LL JUST GET THE QUESTIONS OUT OF THE WAY SO YOU CAN FOCUS.

QUESTION ONE: DID YOU USE A DONOR?

YES. OBVIOUSLY.
HOW ELSE WOULD WE
HAVE DONE IT?
WHAT YOU'RE REALLY ASKING
FOR IS DETAILS, RIGHT?

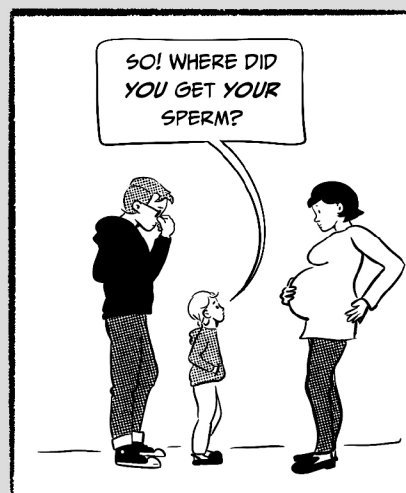
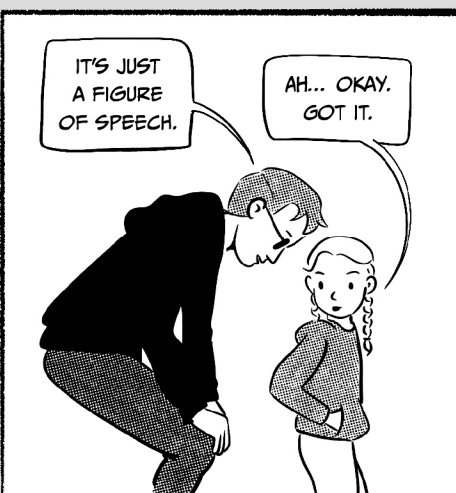
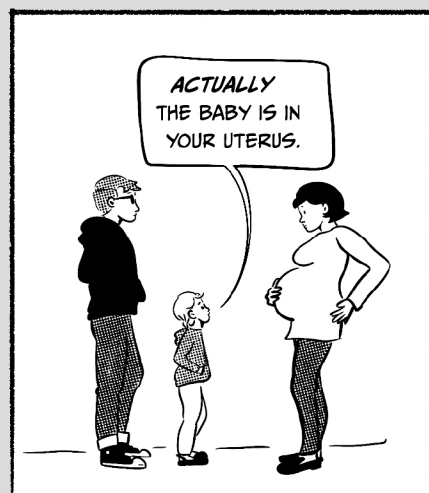
THE BEST PART OF HAVING
A CHILD WITH A DONOR IS
EVERY TIME THEY EXHIBIT
A DIFFICULT OR UNPLEASANT
QUALITY, YOU CAN LOOK AT
EACH OTHER OVER THEIR
HEADS AND KNOWINGLY
AGREE SHE GET THIS
FROM HIM.



OUR DONOR IS AN OLD, DEAR FRIEND OF MY WIFE'S.
HE AND HIS FAMILY LIVE FAR AWAY FROM US,
SO COORDINATING MONTHLY-INSEMINATION-ATTEMPT-TRIPS
WAS A HUGE PAIN IN THE ASS. BUT NOW, ONCE A YEAR WE HAVE
A VISIT WITH THEM WHERE WE LINE ALL THE KIDS UP
AND COMPARE THEIR PHYSICAL FEATURES AND IT'S HILARIOUS.

THERE ARE FOUR KIDS BETWEEN THE TWO FAMILIES
AND EVERYONE HAS KNOWN THE DEAL SINCE THEY WERE
OLD ENOUGH TO KNOW THERE WAS A DEAL TO KNOW.

THEY ONCE TOLD US WE HAD TO STOP THANKING THEM
BECAUSE IT WAS MAKING IT WEIRD, WHICH IS FINE, BECAUSE
THE DEPTH OF LOVE AND GRATITUDE I HAVE FOR THEM ISN'T
SOMETHING I COULD EXPRESS IN A COMIC.



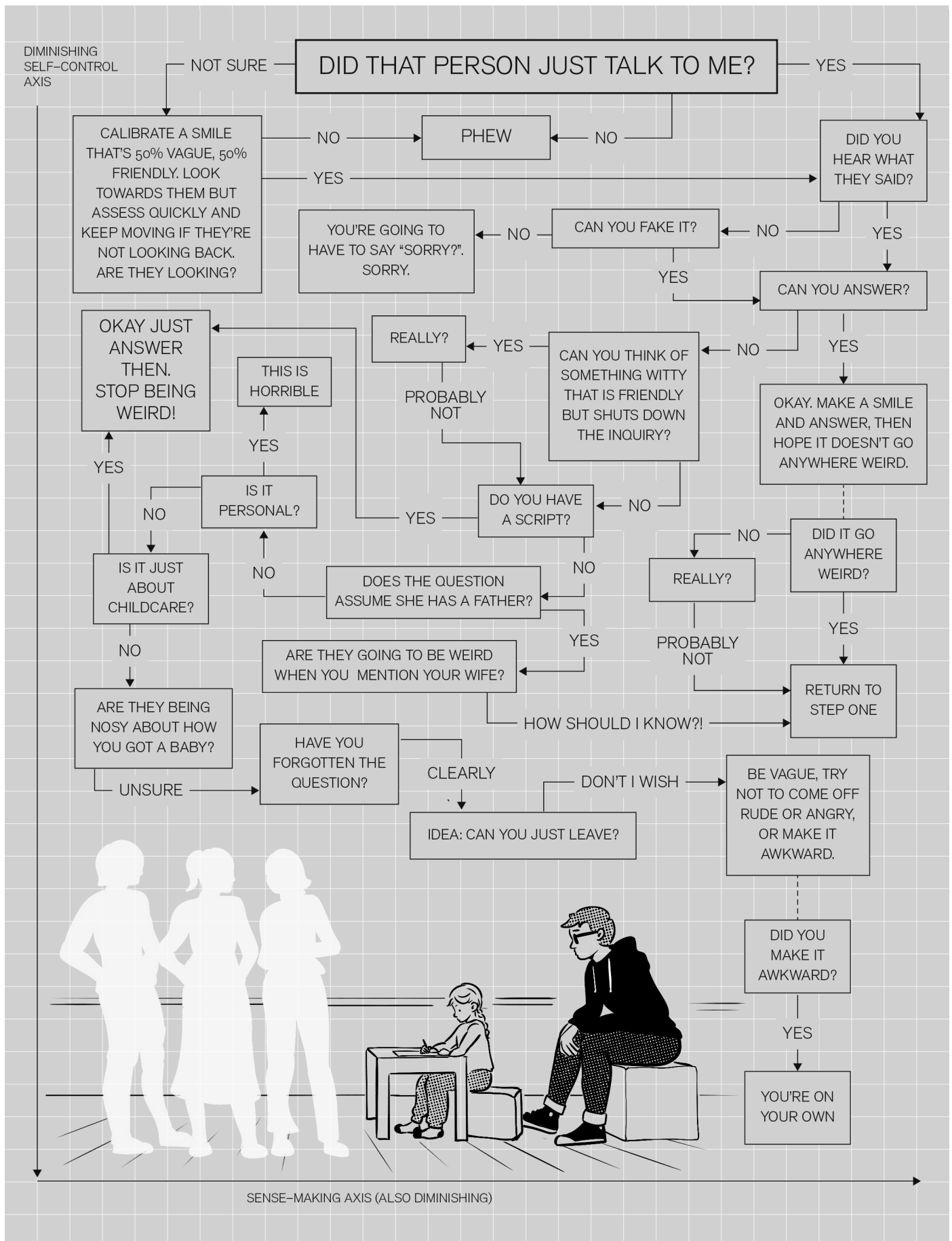
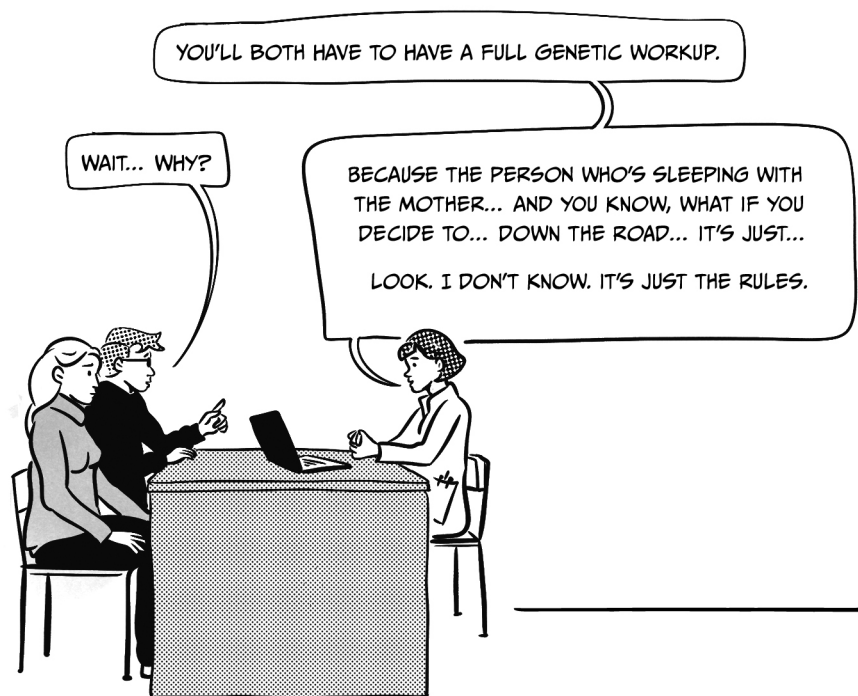


Figure 2. Decision tree - "Did That Person Just Talk To Me?"

QUESTION TWO: DID YOU GO THROUGH A CLINIC?

WE TRIED TO,
IT SEEMED OBVIOUS
WE SHOULD.

BUT IT WAS CLEAR FROM
THE OUTSET THAT THEY
WERE SET UP TO DO
SOMETHING DIFFERENT, AND
WHILE THEY WERE WILLING
TO HELP, THE LOOPHOLES,
WORK-AROUNDS, FEES, AND
WAITING PERIODS WERE SO
ONEROUS THAT EVENTUALLY
IT JUST OCCURRED TO US -
WE'RE HANDY ENOUGH
TO D.I.Y. THIS.



HI! IT LOOKS LIKE YOU'RE TRYING TO
BRING SPERM ACROSS THE CANADA/US BORDER!



Did you know that “semen for assisted conception” is considered a “health product”, regulated under the Government of Canada’s Food And Drugs act?⁵ You can have all the semen you want in your own body, or you can put it in a friend’s body, but if you put it in a container you have to follow the rules! Such as “no more than a 90-day supply or a single course of treatment, whichever is less, based on the product's directions for use” and “an official prescription, hospital/pharmacy dispensing instructions, or a doctor’s order included with the health product”.⁶ Tricky!

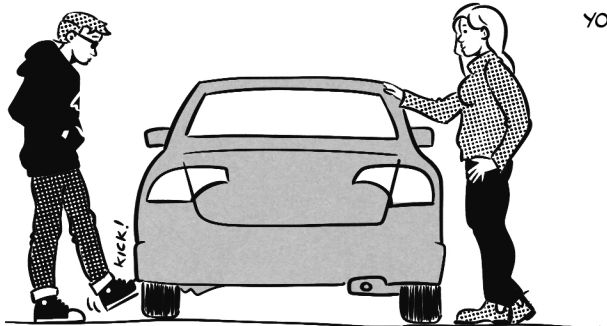
If you’re caught breaking these rules, border officers’ “Enforcement Responses” include (but aren’t limited to) “seizure and detention, forfeiture and destruction”.⁷ That’s a pretty big risk to take with a small amount of something it’s already hard enough to get a hold of.

⁵ “Consolidated Federal Laws of Canada, Food and Drugs Act.”

⁶ Health Canada, “Bringing Health Products into Canada for Personal Use (GUI-0116).”

⁷ Health Canada, “Compliance and Enforcement Policy for Health Products (POL-0001).”

QUESTION THREE: HOW DID YOU DECIDE WHICH ONE OF YOU WOULD GET PREGNANT?



MY WIFE WOULD USE THE METAPHOR "IF YOU WERE PLANNING A ROAD TRIP AND YOU HAD TWO CARS, YOU WOULD TAKE WHICHEVER CAR WAS IN BETTER SHAPE."

ADORABLY, SHE WAS NOT ACTUALLY REFERRING TO OUR PHYSICAL BODIES (ALTHOUGH THE METAPHOR WOULD HAVE HELD, IN FAIRNESS). SHE WAS REFERRING TO THE FACT THAT SHE HAD A JOB WITH PAID MATERNITY LEAVE, AND I WAS A FREELANCE FOLKSINGER/POSTER DESIGNER/PART-TIME ART STUDENT WHO WOULD REGULARLY USE THE PHRASE "WORKING ON SOMETHING BIG RIGHT NOW" TO REFER TO CARTOON RE-WATCHES.



QUESTION 4: ARE YOU GOING TO CARRY THE NEXT ONE?

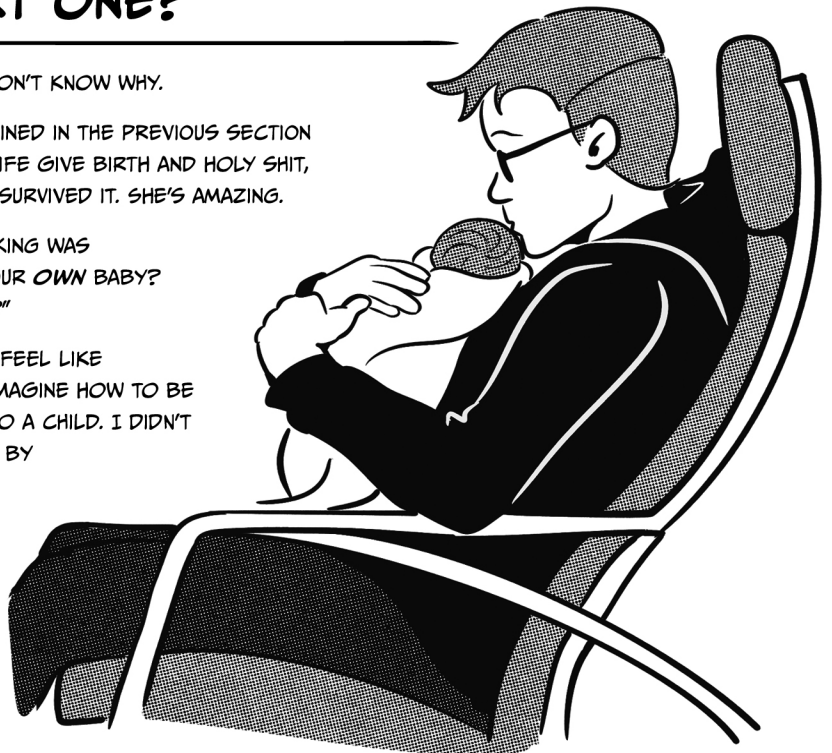
EVERYONE ASKED ME THIS. *EVERYONE*. I DON'T KNOW WHY.

THE ANSWER WAS NO, MOSTLY FOR THE REASONS OUTLINED IN THE PREVIOUS SECTION (HARD/GROSS), BUT ALSO BECAUSE I WATCHED MY WIFE GIVE BIRTH AND HOLY SHIT, NO WAY. THAT WAS INCREDIBLE. I WOULD NOT HAVE SURVIVED IT. SHE'S AMAZING.

I THINK WHAT PEOPLE WERE *REALLY* ASKING WAS "DON'T YOU WANT THE EXPERIENCE OF GROWING YOUR *OWN* BABY? DON'T YOU WANT TO FEEL THAT BOND?"

I DIDN'T KNOW HOW TO EXPLAIN THAT I DIDN'T FEEL LIKE ANYTHING WAS MISSING FROM OUR BOND. I COULDN'T IMAGINE HOW TO BE CLOSER, OR MORE OPEN TO, OR MORE CONNECTED TO A CHILD. I DIDN'T FEEL LIKE MOTHERHOOD WAS MAGICALLY BESTOWED BY BIOLOGY, AND NEITHER DID MY WIFE. MOTHERHOOD WAS THE THING WE SHOWED UP TO DO EVERY DAY, AND ALL NIGHT, NO MATTER WHAT IT ASKED OF US.

I WOULD MAKE SOME CRACK LIKE "THIS ONE TURNED OUT OKAY, WHY MESS WITH THE RECIPE?" BUT THE IMPLICATIONS MADE MY HEAD SPIN, AND GOING THROUGH THE DAY FEEL LIKE NAVIGATING A MINEFIELD.



QUESTION FIVE: ARE YOU LEGALLY HER MOTHER?

THIS ONE WAS GREAT
BECAUSE THE IMPLICATION WAS
"WHAT IF YOUR WIFE DIES"
AND ALSO
"COULD YOU JUST BAIL IF YOU WANTED?"
DEFINITELY TOPICS I WAS EQUIPPED
TO DEAL WITH IN CASUAL CONVERSATION
AT THE PLAY GYM. NO PROBLEM.

I WAS LEGALLY HER MOTHER.
BUT THE HOOPS WE HAD TO JUMP THROUGH
TO GET THERE WERE PRETTY RIDICULOUS...

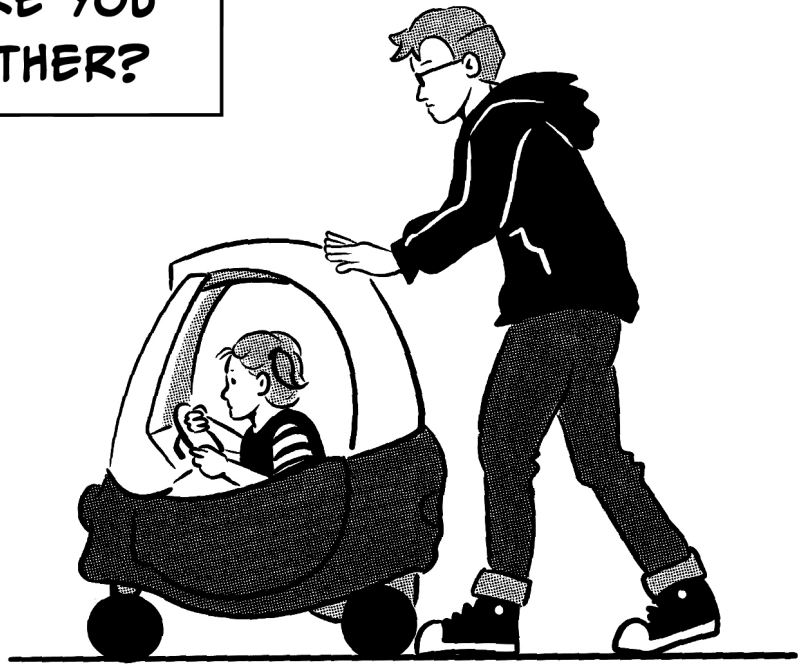


Figure 3. "Invasive Questions", a comic by Amy Noseworthy



HI! IT LOOKS LIKE YOU'RE TRYING TO SECURE
YOUR RIGHTS AS A NON-BIOLOGICAL PARENT!

Securing parental rights for non-biological, same-sex parents has never been consistently legally codified in Canada. Instead, same-sex parents have relied on a piecemeal collection of legal workarounds, the most common of which is second-parent adoption. Adoption is the only way to formally terminate the parental rights of a child's biological parent – a reality that leaves donors and surrogates on the hook as much as it makes legal protection inaccessible to queer parents.

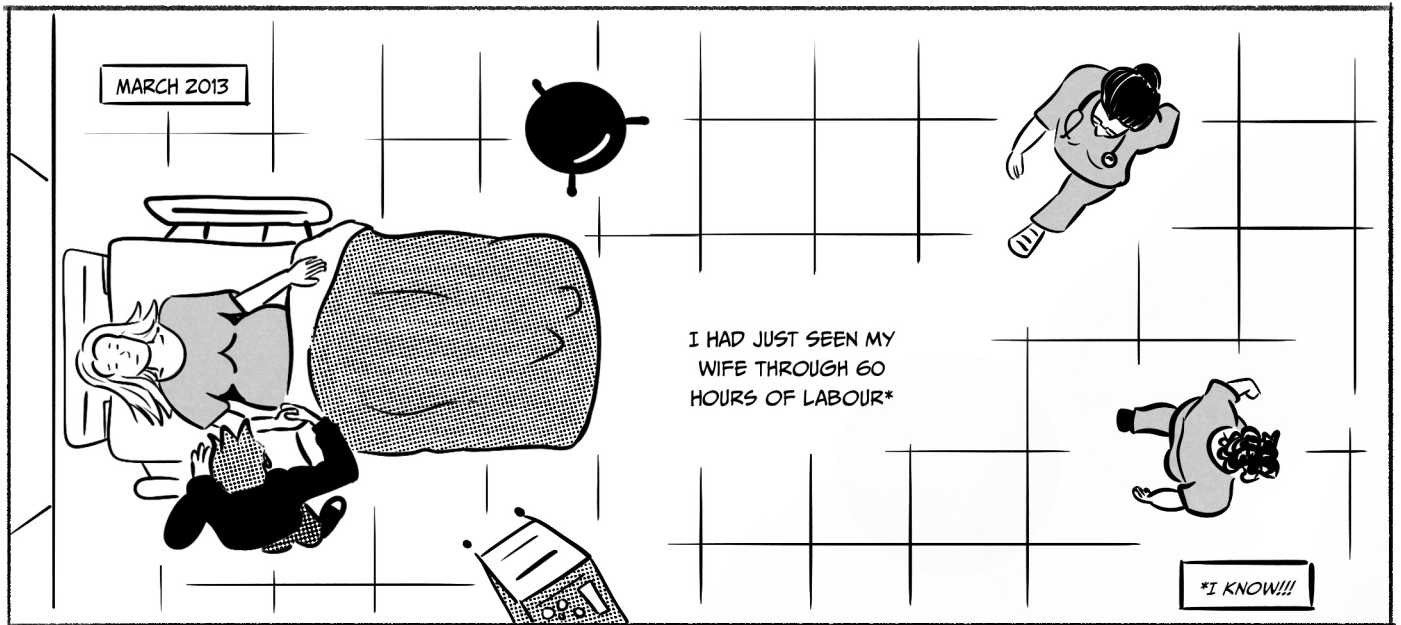
In 1995, four lesbian couples in Ontario managed to convince a judge that allowing a second-parent adoption was in the best interest of their children. Their argument was based in part on an analogy to step-parent adoption – a legal remedy that was not available to same-sex couples because they could not legally marry. This ruling allowed same-sex couple who conceived via **anonymous** donation (only) access to second-parent adoption.

This imperfect solution was expensive to access, and available only under specific conditions. It's worth noting that, at this time, if a woman with an infertile husband conceived via donor sperm, that husband was considered the child's presumptive parent from birth and was not required to adopt. This case was undoubtedly a victory for queer families, but the fight was far from over.⁸

⁸ "A Legal History of Adoption in Ontario, 1921-2015."



⁹ Summers, *Pregnant Butch*, 64.



NEVER HAD I BEEN MORE AWARE OF WHAT A **BADASS** SHE WAS. BUT THE **FRAGILITY** OF HER LIFE, OF HER BODY, HAD NEVER BEEN MORE APPARENT EITHER.

ANY LITTLE THING COULD HAPPEN. THE RISK FELT UNBEARABLE...



SO **UNSPECIFIC** THAT THERE WAS NO WAY TO GUARD AGAINST IT,

BUT SO **CONSEQUENTIAL** I DIDN'T KNOW HOW TO LIVE WITH IT.

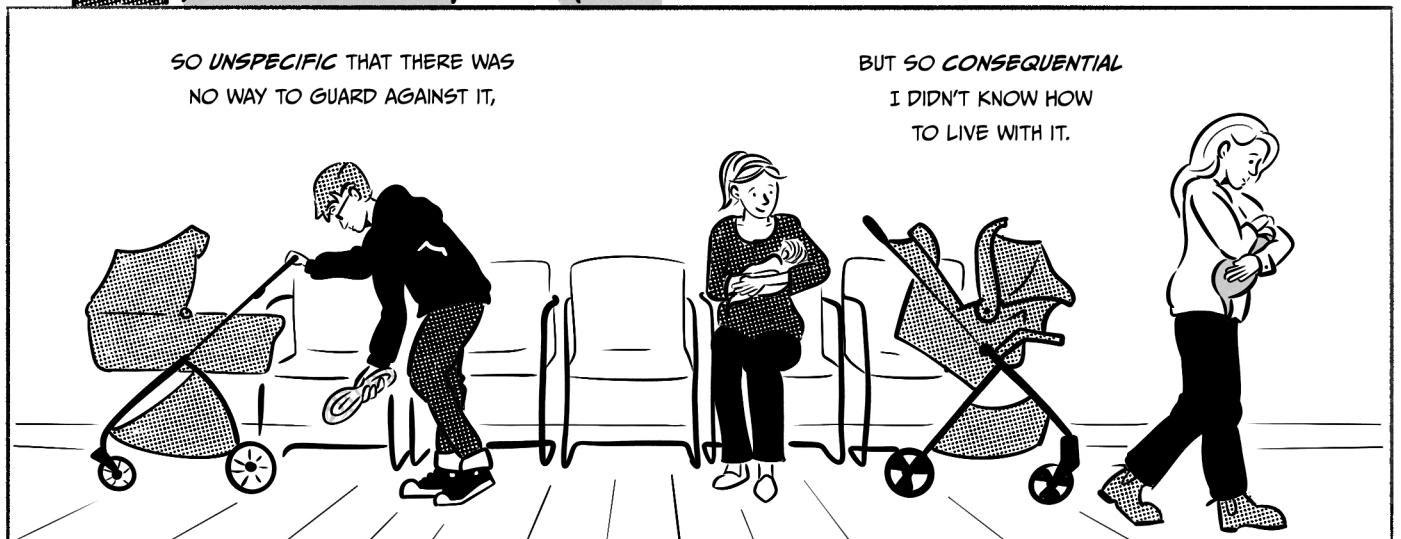


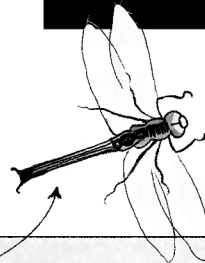
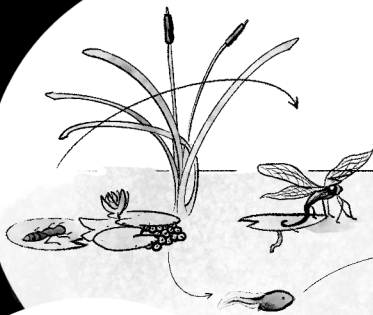
Figure 4. "Second Parent Adoption", a comic by Amy Noseworthy

Change, Part Two: Transformation



THE NATURAL WORLD OFFERS US A LESS DRAMATIC, BUT NO LESS THOROUGH MODEL OF CHANGE IN "INCOMPLETE METAMORPHOSIS", OR "PROGRESSIVE TRANSFORMATION", SUCH AS THAT WHICH OCCURS IN THE LIFE CYCLES OF DRAGONFLIES AND FROGS.

THE BODY OF THE TADPOLE IS NOT DESTROYED IN ITS JOURNEY TO MATURITY AS A FROG. THE APPEARANCE OF LIMBS, DEVELOPMENT OF LUNGS, AND DISAPPEARANCE OF THEIR TAILS IS A GRADUAL, STEADFAST AND STEP-BY-STEP PROCESS FROM WATER-BOUND EGG TO LEAPING AMPHIBIAN.



THE GERMAN IDEALISTS VIEWED PROGRESS TOWARDS REASON AS AN UNSWERVING MARCH TOWARDS PERFECTION, WISDOM BUILT UPON WISDOM, ONE SPIRALLING STEP AFTER ANOTHER.

HEGEL WOULD SUGGEST THIS ADVANCEMENT TOWARDS REASON WOULD ULTIMATELY BRING MAN CLOSER TO GOD. NOW, I'M NO THEOLOGIAN, BUT IT'S DIFFICULT TO REGARD THE SPECTACULAR IRESISCENCE OF THE DRAGONFLY'S WING WITHOUT AT LEAST A...

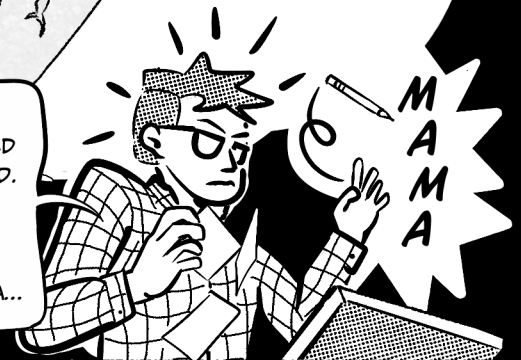


Figure 5. "Change Part Two" by Amy Noseworthy

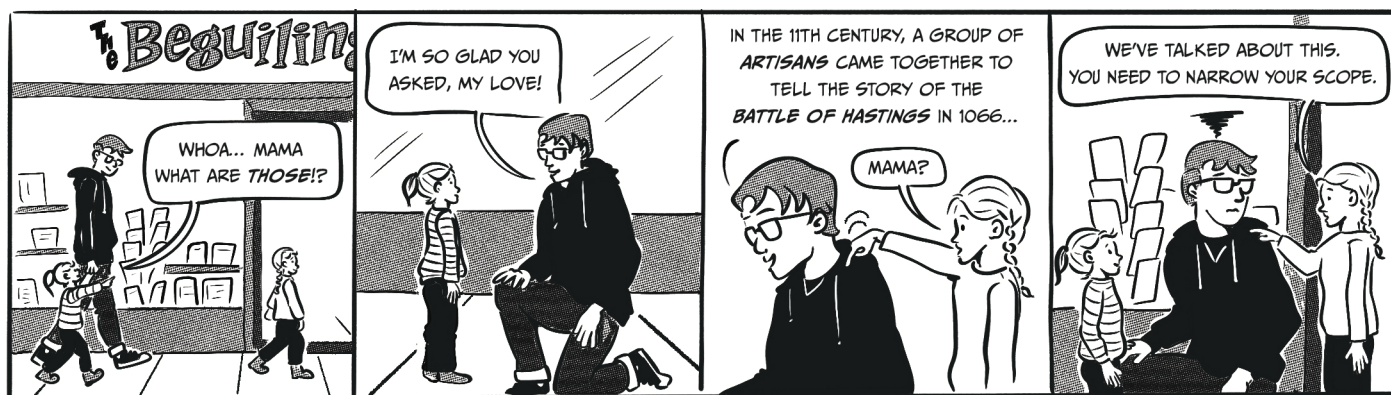


Figure 6. "Scope", by Amy Noseworthy

PART ONE: WHAT CAN COMICS DO?

The marriage of comics and newspapers can be traced to early-1900s New York, when Joseph Pulitzer's *New York World* and William Randolph Hearst's *New York Journal* discovered comics' popularity and, in maximizing the resultant boost to circulation, created the great comic boom of the early 20th century. They competed ruthlessly for talent, influence, and readers; political cartoons, gag strips, and serialized fictional comics thrived with a daily demand for new material.¹⁰

From within this fervour, a consistent visual language of cartooning began to emerge – principles of cartooning which, though difficult to quantify or catalogue completely, are immediately recognizable to the comics audience. Will Eisner – often credited for creating the first graphic novel, *A Contract With God*, and with coining the term "graphic novel" – writes "Modern readers can be expected to have an easy understanding of the image-word mix ... Comics can be 'read' in a wider sense than that term is commonly applied."¹¹ Formal conventions like panels, speech balloons, thought bubbles, "emanata" (swirls and squiggles above a character's head to indicate emotion), and various indicia (marks to indicate motion, speed, impact, aroma, heat, etc.) all become roughly standardized by repeated use in the early 20th century. "Comics employ a series of repetitive images and recognizable symbols. When these are used again and again... they become a distinct language... It is this disciplined application that creates the 'grammar' of sequential art."¹² The informality, pliancy, and elasticity of this visual grammar allows comics to communicate with such broad flexibility and unexpected depth.

Reading Comics Is Harder Than It Looks

There is a lot happening beneath the surface of a comic. In his foundational text *Understanding Comics*, Scott McCloud tries for the entire first chapter to come up with a working definition of what makes a comic. His success is debatable (and debated) but, in his attempt to define what comics *are* he does come up with a fairly comprehensive list of what comics *have* – that is, characteristics that, while no comic has all of, most comics have lots of. He performs "aesthetic surgery [to] separate **form** from **content**"¹³ in order to focus solely on the *mechanics* of comics, and from there builds a thorough account of how the language of comics operates – including the relationship between panel and page, between text and image, between space and time, and, most importantly, between artist and reader. He settles on "juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or to produce an

¹⁰ Hess and Kaplan, *The Ungentlemanly Art: A History of American Political Cartoons*, 122.

¹¹ Eisner, *Comics and Sequential Art*, 1.

¹² Eisner, 2.

¹³ McCloud, *Understanding Comics*, 5.

aesthetic response in the viewer”, but immediately admits “for all the doors that our definition **opens**, there is one which it **closes**.”¹⁴

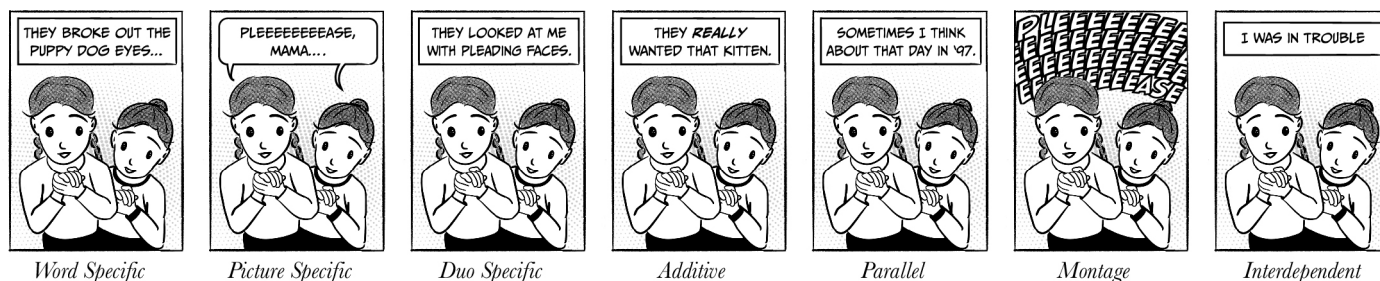


Figure 7. McCloud's seven categories of word-picture combinations

In unpacking the word-image relationships at work in comic art, McCloud develops a list types of combinations – word specific (picture illustrates text but doesn't add meaning), picture specific (words add a soundtrack to the visual but don't add meaning), duo specific (word and image convey the same meaning), additive (word and image elaborate or amplify each other), parallel (word and image do not appear to intersect), montage (text is integrated as part of the image), and the most common word/image combination – interdependent, where “words and pictures go *hand in hand* to convey an idea that neither could express alone.”¹⁵ While all of these relationships can work to convey meaning, McCloud points out that the most successful comic art creates meaning by leveraging the interplay between word and image to create something that is greater than the sum of the two. Cartoonists make choices around composition and framing, pacing, typography, distance from the subject, viewing angle, and so on to create layer upon layer of meaning. Each, to a greater or lesser degree, is a conscious choice to place visual elements in relationship with one another in service of the cartoonist's expression. Readers are then able to discern meaning from each of those choices, and the way they interact, on both a conscious and unconscious register.

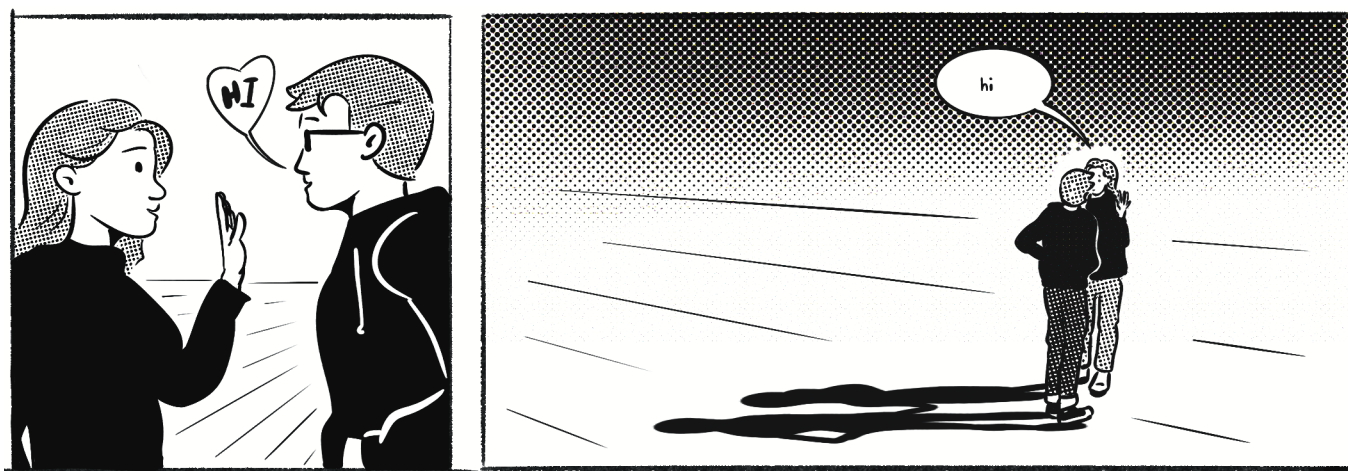


Figure 8. Both of these panels could be accurately described as “two people meet face-to-face, one greets the other with ‘hi’.” But different compositional, spatial, and typographical choices work together to convey very different meanings.

Comics-thinkers like Art Speigleman and Hilary Chute have worked to coin the term “decoding” as a more apt description of the act of reading comic art.¹⁶ The discursive, often disjunctive, interplay of word and image – within panels, across pages, and often spanning the scope of entire books – requires an active, sometimes labour intensive, investment of attention and interpretive skill by the reader. The philosophical study of aesthetics has identified a foundational difference between the act of reading text and the act of “reading” images – “The open-endedness of the

¹⁴ McCloud, 20.

¹⁵ McCloud, 154–55.

¹⁶ Chute, “Comics as Literature?,” 460.

task of “reading” pictures is related to the fact that the experience of *seeing-as* and *seeing-in* is not a momentary occurrence but a continuous state.”¹⁷ Put simply – the longer you look, the more you see. This kind of “seeing” requires the reader to ascertain information – spatial, temporal, and narrative – from nothing but an arrangement of marks and (typically minimal) text. This overlapping crossfire of interplays, influences and exchanges is a phenomenon that is both internal to the form – that is, occurring in the dialogic, interdependent relationship between word and image – and external, echoed in the action of the reader when they engage in the deductive, imaginative meaning-making that constitutes the act of decoding.

Beyond that, because comic panels are understood to be in sequence, the reader must do the work of interpreting what occurs *between* panels – the relationship between concurrent images, the cause and effect working from one panel to the next, and so on. Scott McCloud describes this as the “phenomenon of observing the parts but perceiving the whole”, a practice he refers to as “closure”.¹⁸ Hillary Chute sums up this peculiar-to-comics phenomenon as “drawing its readers *in* to construct meaning in the spaces of the gutters between the panels that constitute its most fundamental narrative grammar.”¹⁹ This idea is resonant with approaches to Indigenous storywork, where visualization by the reader/listener is an essential part of making meaning from stories. Scholar Jo-Ann Archibald emphasizes the act of visualization, or “to go within oneself”, as essential to learning from stories.²⁰

To engage with comics is to experience a constant flow of prompts to the imagination. Indeed, comics as a form *only* function when the reader contributes their own imagination. This surrender of effort to the act of decoding comic art translates into both emotional investment and a sense of intimacy with the material. These factors work together to make comics capable of expressing immense depth and complexity – a perfect container for a story told in search of connection, compassion and understanding. Perhaps this accounts, at least in part, for the fact that autobiography has become so dominant in the field of graphic narrative.



Figure 9. “Closure”, by Amy Noseworthy

¹⁷ Walton, *Mimesis as Make-Believe*, 308.

¹⁸ McCloud, *Understanding Comics*, 63.

¹⁹ Warhol and Lanser, *Narrative Theory Unbound: Queer and Feminist Interventions*, 199.

²⁰ Archibald, *Indigenous Storywork*, 134.

"DRAWING YOUR BODY CAN BE AN ACT OF POLITICAL SPEECH."²¹

– HILLARY CHUTE



Figure 10. A cartoon of a cartoonist cartooning a cartoon of a cartoonist.

Comics, Memoir and the Expression of Interior Life.

Memoir and autobiography have been mainstays of the field of graphic novels ever since Justin Green waged battle against his intrusive, lustful thoughts in 1972's *Binky Brown Meets the Holy Virgin Mary*. Green expertly wielded the form to create a vivid memoir of teenage terror, telling the story of a young man hounded by his sinful thoughts, under the constant threat of both eternal torment and discovery by Catholic Nuns. Green crammed his drawings full of "pecker rays"²² – laser-like beams that cut across the panel in multiple directions as every inanimate object suddenly morphed into a disembodied phallus – as a visual translation of the effects of what he would later learn was obsessive-compulsive disorder. He painted a singularly deft portrait of his specific, complicated, unique lived reality on the comics page. His ground-breaking work opened a floodgate for autobiographically inspired stories in the medium of comics.

The cartoonist's toolbox is uniquely well equipped for the task of depicting of inner life. Characters' imagined reality, thoughts and emotions are depicted *simultaneously* alongside their

physical reality, placing the reader directly inside the character's experience. But more than that, comic art allows for a weaving and layering of disparate timelines as well as interior and exterior realities – a fertile canvas upon which to wrestle infinitely complex, emotionally-loaded questions into some kind of narrative order. x

The process of building the narrative on and across the pages is laid out plainly; the reader re-traverses the artist's path, to some extent, as they decode meaning from the work. This synchronicity allows for an expressly delicate, nuanced layering of meaning, and allows the comic artist to communicate with immediacy and intimacy. The cartoonist is not only constantly physically present for the reader, the reader has literally stepped inside the cartoonist's point of view, experiencing their positionality and perspective directly.

This makes comics an especially *embodied* art form. Cartoonist A.K. Summers (*Topless Dickless Clueless*, *World Without Femmes*, *Pregnant Butch*) describes the transition of thought to page via drawing as a rich translation of the cartoonist's experience of their own memory:

"I'm not just talking about the visual impact of a drawing – but the act of drawing itself. It is a physical act, and leaves a trace of that physicality on the page in its lines – sketchy, violent, sure, wavering, controlled, etc. I believe the physical act of drawing one's experiences taps into bodily

²¹ Warhol and Lanser, *Narrative Theory Unbound: Queer and Feminist Interventions*, 201.

²² Green, *Binky Brown Meets the Holy Virgin Mary*.

memories in a more direct way than just writing about them does, and helps with retrieving memories and with accessing/expressing feelings about those remembered experiences.”²³

In decoding comics, the reader interacts directly with marks made by the artist’s hand, and in some cases, with handwritten text, as they translate their recollected and/or imagined reality on to the visual plane of the page. These marks constitute, among other things, entire characters who communicate verbally, but also with their appearance, pose and posture, placement in the frame, tone and colour, facial expressions, and, sometimes, extra-diegetic indicia like emanata or motion lines (for a start). Robin Warhol describes the tangible physicality of comic characters as uniquely corporeal – “in their pen-and-ink materiality they exist independently of what we mean when we talk about characters in prose texts”.²⁴ Although the cartoonist may stretch and trouble their depictions to within an inch of their characters’ lives in pursuit of compelling expression, comic characters’ appearances are solidly established in the reader’s imagination. They therefore resist the kind of inventive, imaginary story-world creation that occurs in the mind’s-eye of a reader of prose. In comics the story-world is arranged visually, it’s the action that’s co-created in the reader’s imagination.

Comics’ ability to place the reader inside the cartoonist’s perspective is not its only strength when it comes to crafting memoir. Comics are, structurally, especially well-equipped to handle temporality – indeed, the principle that panels in succession occur in a temporal sequence is foundational to the form. Hilary Chute refers to the comic page as “a temporal map”,²⁵ directing readers through a narrative chronology via an arrangement of panels and/or images. Graphic memoirs will often move between depicting the past and a present in which that past is being reflected upon. Touchstone texts like Art Spiegelman’s *Maus* (1980–91) and Howard Cruse’s *Stuck Rubber Baby* (1995) use the conceit of a framing narrative set in the present to both organize and deepen the significance of their narrative arc. Groundbreaking works like Alison Bechdel’s *Fun Home* (2006) toy with readers expectations of narrative time even further, moving us between discreet eras in a not-always-obvious pattern. This kind of slow accumulation of meaning through fleeting glimpses of (at first) seemingly unconnected scenes allows us to infer connection, cause and effect, and resonances which are not always immediately obvious.

While these techniques for composing memoirs are equally available to prose writers, it’s the superimposition of disparate timelines within a single visual plane that is one of comics’ best tricks for mimicking the experience of memory. Although readers have, by now, been trained to read the act placing images in sequence as a reference to linear temporality, comics do not unfold in time like film, theatre, or even prose. The reader’s vision may track across the page in a specific order, but the entire page is present in field of view. This allows the cartoonist to choreograph a path through multiple timelines at various and varying paces, and to superimpose disparate or distant timelines. This temporal stretchiness allows the cartoonist to suggest moments of connection between experiences, moments of insight, to hint at motivations, illustrate emotional baggage, explore what makes a character tick... techniques especially well suited to the genre of autobiography. Or, for example, perfect for depicting a journey to motherhood – a story that is firmly rooted in the present, but deeply connected to the past, and constantly concerned with the future.

The alchemy of making meaning from comic art requires both cartoonist *and* the reader – the cartoonist to translate their imagination on to the page using (or strategically misusing) the established language of comics, and the reader to use their own imagination to decode the comic’s meaning. The study of aesthetics offers us a closer look at what we mean when we say “use our imagination”, a fascinating process that cartoonists have, over time, become quite expert at exploiting.

²³ Murali, “I Set out to Make a Comic That I Would Want to Read,” 300.

²⁴ Warhol and Warhol-Down, “The Space Between: A Narrative Approach to Alison Bechdel’s ‘Fun Home,’” 4.

²⁵ Chute, “Comics as Literature,” 455.

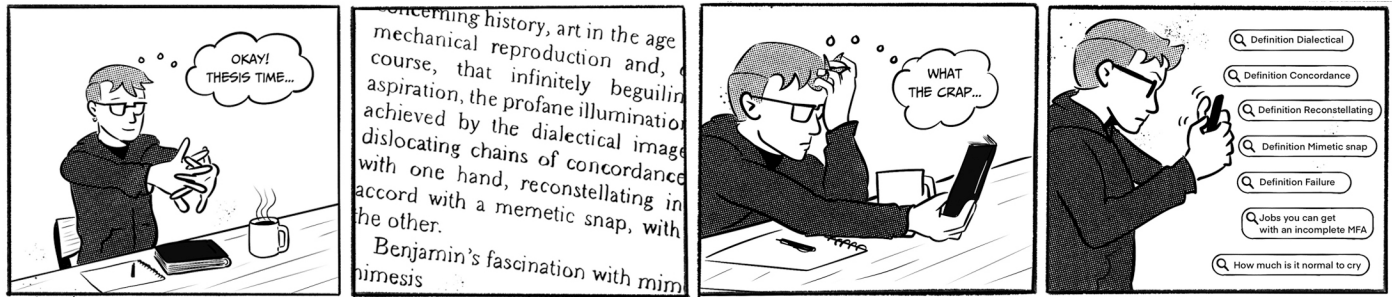


Figure 11. "Mimetic Snap", by Amy Noseworthy

Mimesis, Make-believe, and the "Generation of Fictional Truths"

In the study of aesthetics, where beauty held to be a "greatest good", mimesis is usually translated from the Greek as "imitation", or "emulation".²⁶ Philosopher Kendall Walton's theory of mimesis draws a distinction between *depiction* and *description* in art, noting the former requires "a self-conscious use of one's own perceptual activity as an object of

imagination, rather than a referential relationship between signs and objects".²⁷ Arguably, then, as cartoonist labour to build out people, places and things using mimetic skill via drawing, they create story worlds that their readers access via their own imaginative faculties which are far richer and deeper than a literal reading of the marks on the page would allow. This goes beyond ideas of "closure" in reading comic art – readers are not only filling in the gaps between panels, but generating an entire series of fictional truths in their imagination. A darkened area is understood to be a shadow, which allows the reader to understand the location of a light source, for example. A car overlapping a character's body allows us to understand that car is closer to us than that character. Readers ascertain form and volume from a representation of just an object's outline. The cartoonist suggests reality, the reader must make significant imaginative leaps to understand it.

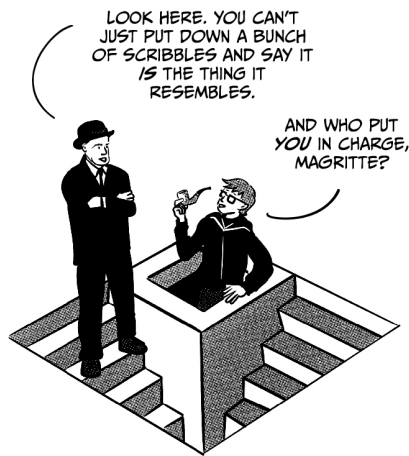


Figure 12. The treachery of cartoons.

Nowhere is this relationship between cartoonist and reader tested more strenuously than by the application of extra-diegetic indicia and emanata. It is only by virtue of a consensus, developed over time between cartoonist and audience, that a reader will instantly understand that a little tornado over a character's head indicates displeasure, little popping bubbles indicate they've been drinking, or that three different things are happening in the drawings to the right, and can generate a narrative from throw to catch, including speed, direction, and maybe, given time, an entire baseball game.

Furthermore, Walton argues, readers do not "attend to both the material surface of a depiction and the objects it depicts simultaneously".²⁸ That is, when observe a drawing of a dog, we think of a dog *or* we think of a piece of paper with pencil marks on it, but in imagining the dog, we are not imagining the pencil. This lens allows us to imagine the

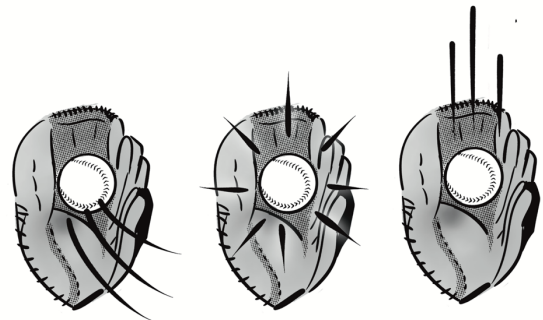


Figure 13. Three different examples of indicia indicating motion and impact.

²⁶ Pappas, "Plato's Aesthetics."

²⁷ Miers, "Depiction and Demarcation in Comics," 145.

²⁸ Miers, 146.

worlds created in comic stories as actually, fully existing in the imagination of both cartoonist and reader, with the comic art serving as a conduit for meaning.

Scholar John Meirs expands on Walton's account of how one interacts with mimetic depiction: "in looking at a picture, we generate fictional truths about our own act of looking: we make it fictional, within the game of make-believe we are playing with the depiction, that our act of looking at the picture is the act of looking at the thing it depicts".²⁹ In decoding comic art, then, we are not simply interpreting marks on the page, deciphering spacial, temporal and plot significance, inferring the relationships and the action that occurs between panels, and organizing all of that information into narrative order. We are entering into a tacit agreement with the cartoonist that the world of the comic is *real*.

The Work of Stories

The term "storywork" was coined by scholar Jo-Ann Archibald to refer to a cultural and educational practice present across many Indigenous cultures, in which specific principles of storytelling are applied to specific goals. Storywork is distinct from, but closely related to, the straightforward preservation of historical record via oral tradition. It consists of either traditional stories or personal experience stories, the aims of which are supporting the best, truest, healthiest expression of the individual self, the transmission of values and beliefs, and the reinforcement of those values in one's relationships with others, as well as with the environment and resources.³⁰

Dr. Archibald's work is specifically referring to spoken stories, but we can place her observations in conversation with comics theory both in terms of the work the audience is doing, and the unique power of stories themselves. When we create a narrative that requires our readers to employ visualization and the use of their own imagination "you're making them work... the story isn't telling the children what to think or feel, but it's giving them the space to think and feel."³¹ A story is not simply the transmission of information, it's an invitation to share an experience, and a space to have that experience in. The shared experience can also be mutual between storyteller and audience – as Eber Hampton writes in his study of First Nations educational methods – "as humans, we always know far more than we can say".³² This deceptively simple axiom speaks to the emotional heart of comic's appeal to those seeking to transmit personal narratives – complex, personal realities that cannot be fully expressed in prose can, often, find expression in the intricate, layered, instinctual and recursive language of comics.

On a personal note – I feel tentative about placing these ideas in conversation with my work as a cartoonist. Indigenous Storywork is a cultural tradition to which I have no personal claim. It's a practice built on strong, deeply held principles that has survived despite direct, violent oppression and attempts at erasure by the forces of colonization. It is implicated in the work of Indigenous self-governance and self-determination, and involves sacred tradition and protocols which, although I have made an honest effort to educate myself about, do not play a role in my life. Scholars like Dr. Archibald and Dr. Hampton have engaged specifically in efforts to make this knowledge available and accessible to white, Western scholars and educators, but I am aware that is not a free-pass to help myself to this knowledge in support of my personal creative goals. Rather, I would like to use these principles as a framework to look at the practice of comic storytelling, my own in particular.

I have been grateful to have my intellectual framework broadened by Indigenous scholarship about what makes stories uniquely powerful teachers. Eber Hampton describes his approach to writing as "iterative rather than linear. It progresses in a spiral that adds a little with each thematic repetition rather than building an Aristotelian argument step-by-step."³³ Jo-Ann Archibald uses the metaphor of "weaving a basket" to describe the kind of learning story offers us – a basket is created by an individual but is connected to tradition and their relationship with land and community; the

²⁹ Miers, 148.

³⁰ Dr. Jo-Ann Archibald on *Indigenous Storytelling*.

³¹ Archibald, *Indigenous Storywork*, 134.

³² Battiste and Barman, *First Nations Education in Canada*, 18.

³³ Battiste and Barman, 6.

weaver pulls from all those sources to create something new and unique to them.³⁴ Traditional Indigenous storytelling techniques ask us to look beyond the typical linear narrative of the hero's journey to create something delicate, self-referential, layered with meaning, and connected to tradition and a shared grammar of symbols, signs, metaphors, and archetypes. These approaches are undeniably resonant with the kind of storytelling techniques available to the cartoonist.

Comics, especially long-running strips, are also stories constructed of self-referential narrative (and visual) spirals, which gradually accumulate meaning through iteration and shared imaginative experience. Similarly, they draw on tradition and a common visual lexicon to weave stories that are inexorably connected to the medium's history and community of practitioners. In my own work, one of the ways I attempt to communicate meaning is by ascribing a conceptual vocabulary to repeated symbols and icons to create a visual shorthand – a couch to represent domesticity and the home, a mug to represent care, comfort and intimacy, plastic waiting room chairs to represent alienation and institutional authority, a television is a window to the otherwise inaccessible world. Repeated use of these symbols allows for a powerful, iterative weaving of meaning and forms a connective tissue that runs throughout my body of work.

Comics scholarship is in broad agreement about the ways comics have influenced culture,³⁵ and while the intentionality of any given cartoonist's social influence is open to debate, Jo-Ann Archibald's work makes it clear that stories can be compelling teachers. Indigenous writers like Harold Johnson and Richard Wagamese, meanwhile, have given us an even more expansive notion of the power of stories to shape our world. Stories do not simply influence us, but rather they form the very fabric of the reality we inhabit.

“People make up stories about how things work, then make up more stories that match up and fit together until these is a web of interwoven stories so complex they become the reality that constitutes society. Society is real. It has power over people. It has norms and rules... But this reality, this powerful control is made up of a series of fictional stories. They are entirely made up, one story modifying the last.”³⁶

Johnson is mainly concerned with how this concept of story underpins societal institutions like national sovereignty, criminality, gender roles, etc. Richard Wagamese turns these ideas inward, to the realm of personal identity and a universal “essential yearning: to belong.”³⁷ He suggests that belonging is dependent on making visible our shared humanity. “We all have stories within us... It is only by sharing our stories, by being strong enough to take a risk—both in the telling and in the asking—that we make it possible to know, recognize and understand each other.”³⁸

Queer theory takes a slightly more defiant view of the value of personal storytelling as grounds for exploring queer subjectivity. *Queers Read This!* – a famous, anonymously-penned pamphlet distributed at New York Pride in 1990 – discussed the imperative need for queer visibility. “Being queer is not about a right to privacy, it is about the freedom to be public, to just be who we are.”³⁹ Feminist interventions, too, stress the importance of insisting upon space for personal stories. “The idea of pathologized bodies *taking up space* .. is able to make these politics and propositions literal and tangible on the page.”⁴⁰ Unpacking my personal drive to tell stories leaves me somewhere in between a yearning to be seen and belong, and a resistant desire to challenge norms and preconceptions about who gets to be a mother.

In response to the titular question “Why Comics?”, Hilary Chute points at comics formal structures as an explanation for the medium's unique ability to “bring forward the hybrid self, the developing self, the split self...”, and “explore the mix-up of the past and present in the protagonist's mind”.⁴¹ Cartoonist Gary Panter suggests that “the

³⁴ Dr. Jo-Ann Archibald on *Indigenous Storytelling*, 2.

³⁵ More on that in part two: What Have Comics Taught Me About Being A Good Mother!

³⁶ Johnson, *The Power of Story*, 45.

³⁷ Wagamese and Taylor, *Richard Wagamese Selected*, 79.

³⁸ Wagamese and Taylor, 85.

³⁹ anonymous, *Queers Read This!*

⁴⁰ Warhol and Lanser, *Narrative Theory Unbound: Queer and Feminist Interventions*, 206.

⁴¹ Chute, *Why Comics?*, 293.

quest of comics is to trick you, the reader, into believing that ... a scribble [is] as alive as you.”⁴² Lynda Barry, meanwhile, suggests the cartoonists ability to perform that trick lies in comics’ materiality. “Paper and ink have conjuring abilities of their own. Arrangements of lines and shapes... make a world we can dwell and travel in... I remember it like it happened to me. I suppose you could say that it did.”⁴³ Finally, Richard Wagamese reminds us of story’s power to make us “aware of our similarities: our yearning for truth, peace, love, belonging, welcome, grace, mercy, a god of our own understanding and at least one moment of real contact at the heart of every day.”⁴⁴ The task of bringing all of these pieces together – stories as teachers, as shapers of reality, and as powerful tools in the fight against oppression – culminates in my personal practice on the comics page. The materiality of the drawn body, panelled pages which function as a temporal map, investigations into and expressions of my recalled, lived experience, and the mimetic representation of my lived-in world allow me to create a reality in which I am undeniably a mother, to communicate that reality with the reader and, in the shared act of imagining, bring that reality to life.



Figure 14. Comics as autobiography

⁴² Chute, 1.

⁴³ Barry, *What It Is*, 37.

⁴⁴ Wagamese, *Embers: One Ojibway's Meditations*, 20.

EMANATA

There are a handful of tools in the cartoonist's toolbox that can be used to express immediate emotions and reactions. Facial expressions and body language are usually primary to this, but over the years a specific visual grammar of small pictographs or flourishes positioned on or above a character's head has emerged. These are called emanata. They have names like "neoflects", "plewds", "squeans", "agitrons" and, my personal favourite, "waftarom" ("stink lines" to the uninitiated).⁴⁵

Autistic people often struggle to interpret facial expressions. As Devon Prince puts it – "I see minute changes in their eyes, forehead, mouth, breathing, and posture, which I then have to effortfully piece together to make an informed guess... Often, it's too much discordant data to make sense of."⁴⁶ This difficulty is linked to reduced activity in the inferior frontal gyrus of the Autistic brain in childhood.⁴⁷ While Autistic brains do often "catch up" in adulthood in terms of the amount of activity in the inferior frontal gyrus, this are attributed to the work Autistic people do to develop individualized systems, tricks, and workarounds for interpreting the emotional content of facial expressions. For example, as I said to the nice psychologist who conducted my day-long Autism assessment, "I don't know what that face is, but I do know that eyebrows down means it's something bad."

I love emanata. I wish people produced them in real life. If someone is happy and laughing, or sad enough to cry, I can read that accurately. If someone is extremely angry, that's also usually clear, but I don't see that a lot (I guess I'm lucky). Everything else is basically unreadable. I typically just panic and guess. It often goes poorly.

This illiteracy translates into my comics. Beyond a basic, unsophisticated repositioning of the eyebrows – a technique Mort Walker calls "oculama"⁴⁸ – I struggle to translate emotion and reaction into facial expressions into my drawings. I gratefully rely on emanata to spell out characters' feelings, another part of what makes the semiotically rich language of comics the right medium for my explorations.



NEOFLECTS



PLEWDS



SQUEANS



AGITRONS



WAFAROMS

Figure 15. Various Emanata

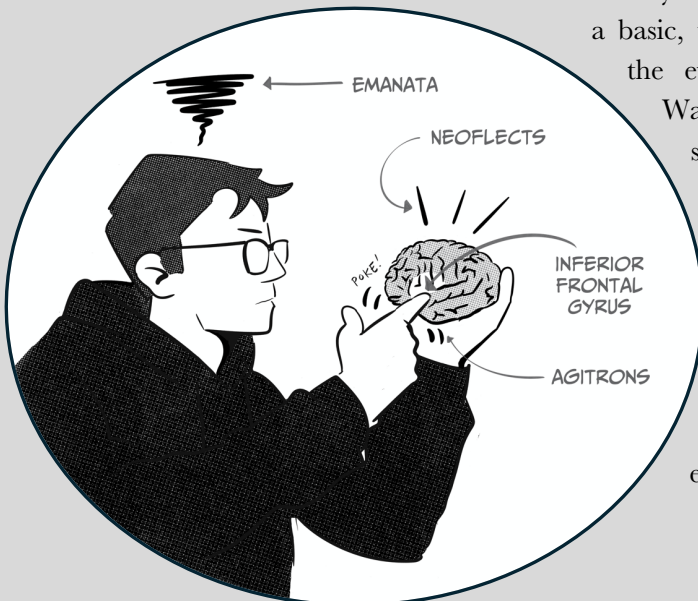


Figure 16. Emanata in action

⁴⁵ Walker, *The Lexicon of Comicana*, 10.

⁴⁶ Price, *Unmasking Autism*, 26.

⁴⁷ Bastiaansen et al., "Age-Related Increase in Inferior Frontal Gyrus Activity and Social Functioning," 837.

⁴⁸ Walker, *The Lexicon of Comicana*, 14.

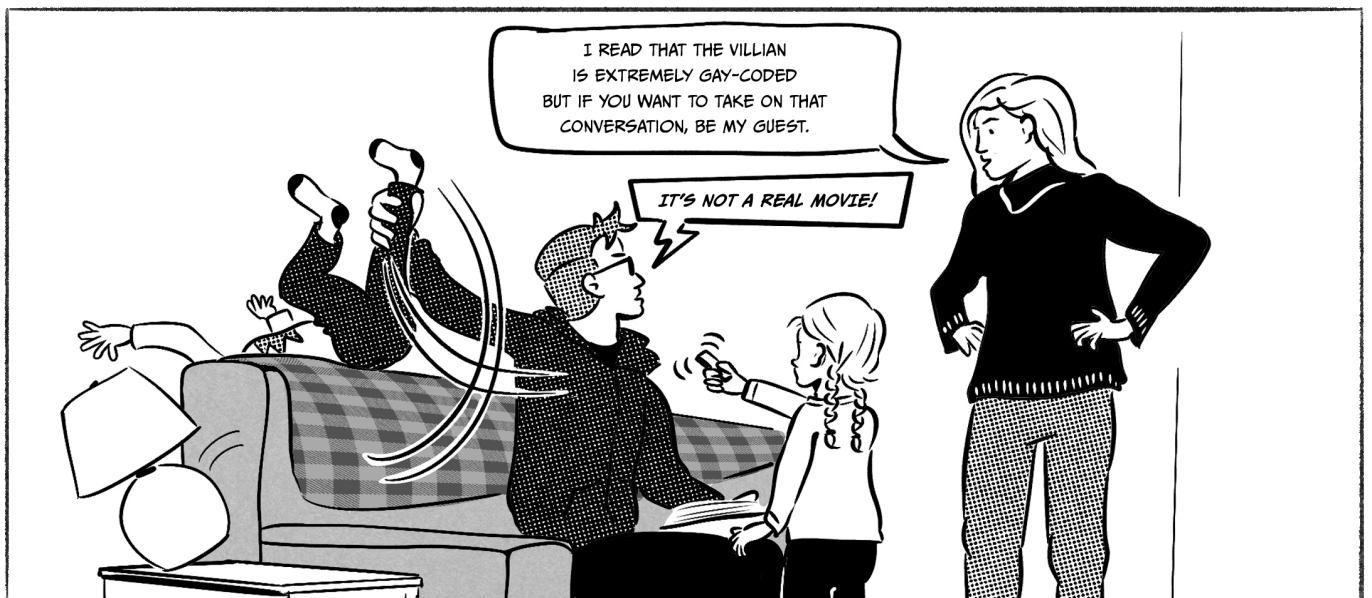
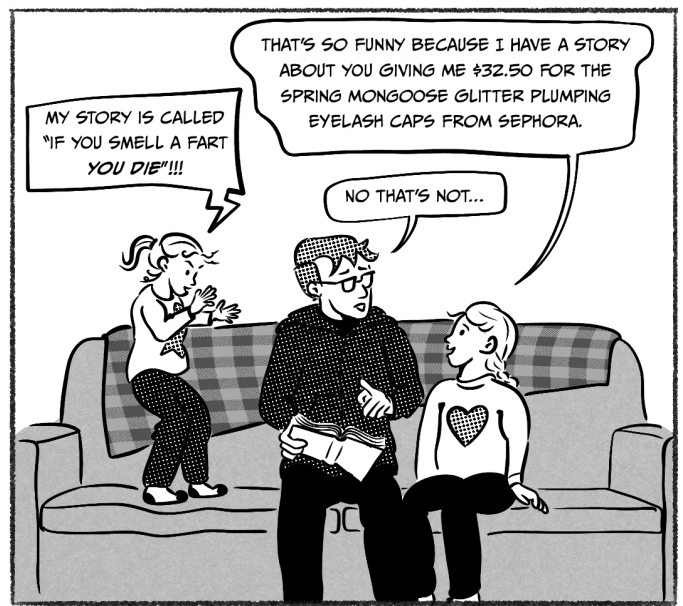
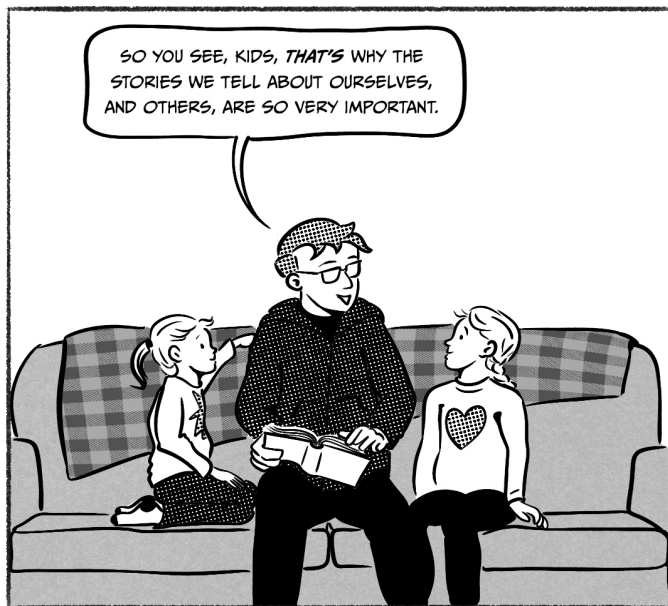


Figure 17. "Stories", by Amy Noseworthy



Change, Part Three: Adaptive Modification

IN THE STUDY OF BIOLOGY, AN ECOLOGICAL *NICHE* IS NOT SIMPLY A PLACE WHERE AN ORGANISM IS MOST COMFORTABLE, BUT RATHER A *RECIPROCAL* PHENOMENON WHICH REFERS TO THE *RELATIONSHIP* BETWEEN AN ORGANISM AND ITS ENVIRONMENT.

ECOSYSTEMS THRIVE WHEN EVERY ORGANISM OCCUPIES THEIR *APPROPRIATE NICHE*, AND ALL OF THEIR NICHES ARE WORKING IN *HARMONIOUS BALANCE*.

ACHIEVING THIS BALANCE OFTEN CALLS FOR *BEHAVIOURAL ADAPTATIONS* ON THE PART OF THESE ORGANISMS.

ADAPTATIONS LIKE THE DEPLOYMENT OF TACTICS TO AVOID PREDATION - LIKE *MIMICRY*, OR *CAMOUFLAGE*

IT ISN'T JUST A QUESTION OF FINDING ONE'S PLACE. *HARMONY*, SURVIVAL EVEN, AT A POPULATION LEVEL OFTEN CALLS ON THE *INDIVIDUAL* TO...

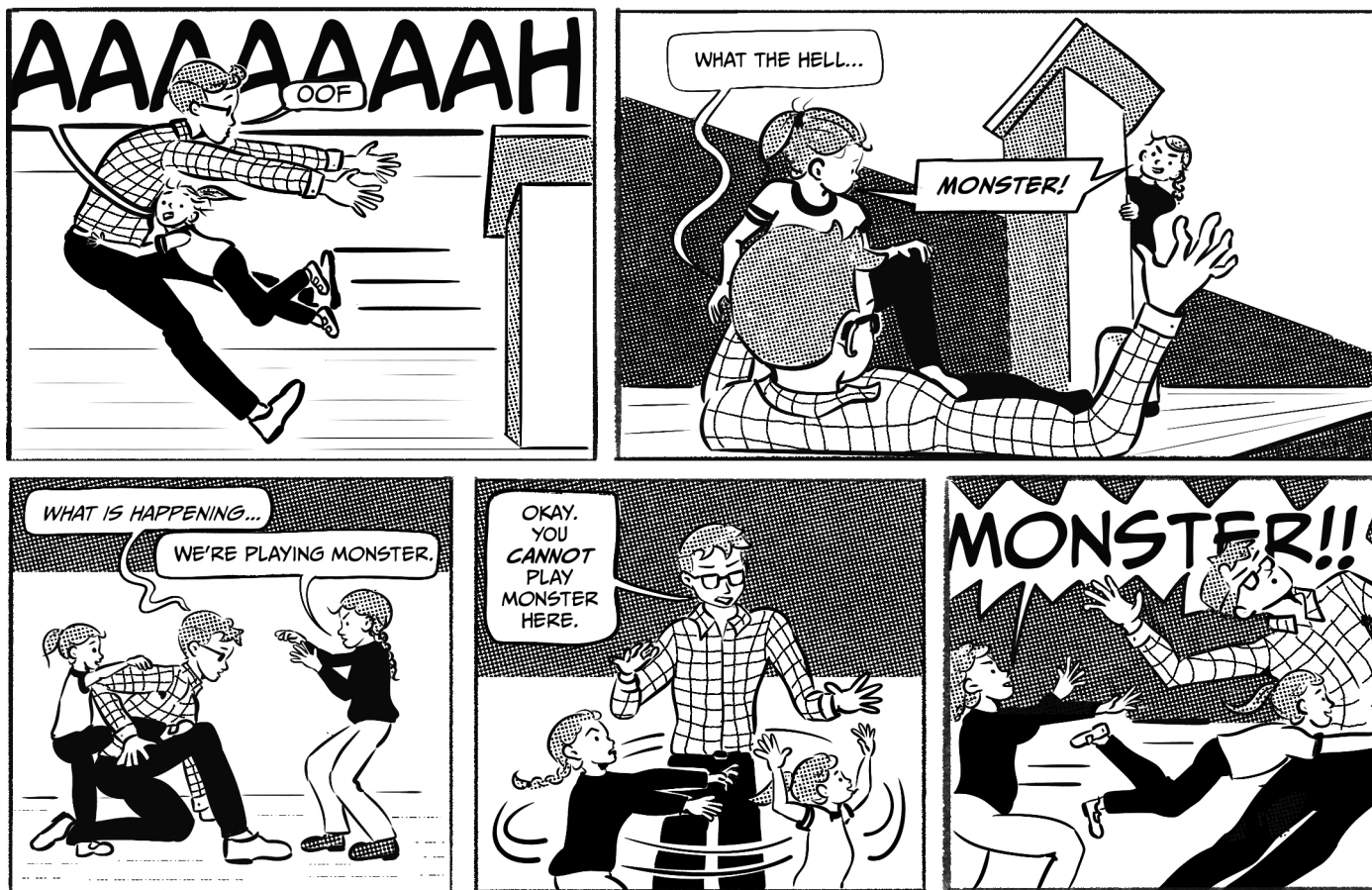


Figure 18. “Change, part 3” by Amy Noseworthy



HI! IT LOOKS LIKE YOU'RE TRYING TO CHANGE THE LAW!

In June of 2006, Justice Paul Rivard of The Ontario Superior Court ruled that birth provisions under the Vital Statistics Act were discriminatory to same-sex couples, and gave the province 12 months to change the law.⁴⁹ Ten years later, in response to the fact that the law had still not changed, Toronto MPP Cheri DiNovo introduced Bill 137, also known as “Cy and Ruby’s Act”.⁵⁰ Named for the children of Kirstie and Jennifer Mathers-McHenry, the creation of the bill was driven by the harrowing experience of the birth of their second child: When Jennifer encountered medical distress during labour, it occurred to Kirstie that, should the worst occur, she would not have legal recognition as their child’s mother. Thankfully, Jennifer and baby came through okay, and these two mothers (who also happened to be lawyers) set out to change the law. They enlisted the support of MPP Cheri DiNovo to draft a private members bill which they introduced to Kathleen Wynne’s Liberal provincial government. It was received with “overwhelming support from MPPs of all political parties, as well as family, reproductive and human rights lawyers”.⁵¹ The bill passed second reading in December of 2015, where it languished until April 2016, when a group of families, mine among them, filed a charter challenge and took the Ontario provincial government to court.⁵² The government offered no argument as to why the bill shouldn’t pass, but in May of 2016 announced their intention to draft their own legislation to update the laws around birth registration.

⁴⁹ “Court Rules Lesbians Can Be Co-Mothers - Toronto Star June 7, 2006.”

⁵⁰ mariacalabrese, “Cy and Ruby’s Act for Assisted Reproduction.”

⁵¹ mariacalabrese.

⁵² MacLachlan and Noseworthy, “By Ignoring Parental Rights, Ontario Puts Our Daughter’s Welfare at Risk.”

PART 2: WHAT HAVE COMICS TAUGHT ME ABOUT BEING A GOOD MOTHER?

Newspaper comics, commonly referred to as “the Funnies”, were popular enough to serve as a western cultural touchstone for most of the 20th century. The sheer volume of material produced in daily comic strips, along with the constant pace of, and hunger for, new content turned the funny pages into both a societal mirror and a disseminator of social trends. In her 2021 book *Typical Girls* – a collection of essays tracing the paths of several well-known comic strip women through the history of the medium – Susan Kirtley reflected on the relationship between long-running, daily serial strips and the public as a reciprocal one – “Comic strips do more than simply reflect society, they help shape it.”⁵³ As these strips would “serially reproduce and reflect a **particular** image of society”⁵⁴ (emphasis mine), they entered into a kind of chicken-and-egg relationship with the western imagination, promoting a specific set of desirable values, a specific image of prosperity and familial security, an unambiguous model of both heroism and villainy, and strictly gendered norms, along with a set of peculiar stereotypes that persist to this day.⁵⁵

Comics’ influence on Western society is evident in the way comic strip references have permeated language – *Keeping Up With The Joneses* was a comic strip about a family attempting to emulate the lifestyle of their wealthy neighbours that ran from 1913–1938; “Sadie Hawkins’ dances” were invented by Al Capp in *Li’l Abner* in 1937.⁵⁶ The term “security blanket” to describe transitional and comfort objects was popularized by Charles Schulz’s *Peanuts*, “Brainiac” in the pages of *Superman*, “Goon” comes from *Popeye*... the list goes on.

Comics that explore family life and concerns of the home, classified by Bob Abel in his exhaustive 1963 survey of Sunday comic strip content *The Funnies, An American Idiom* as “domestic situation dramas”,⁵⁷ emerged alongside other prominent categories like adventure and humor at the birth of the medium in the early 20th century. These comic strips explored everyday life and family relations with gentle humour, eschewing vulgarity, controversy, and politics in favour of a wholesome idealism. These were strips that were “designed to console ourselves about the imperfections of common, everyday middle-class life.”⁵⁸ Themes of leisure, children’s light-hearted mischief, put-upon-yet-patient parents, and a strictly nuclear family structure – Dad at work, Mom at home raising two-to-five loveable scamps while tending to the housework – formed the foundation and the heart of these stories.

A particular portrait of motherhood surfaced in these family strips. She was intimately tied to the home, bearing responsibility for all the labour of running a household, asserting jurisdiction and expertise over (only) this specific realm



“DARLING I AGREE THIS IS VERY EXCITING BUT REMEMBER TO ASK YOURSELF: HOW MANY EXAMPLES DOES THE OTHER PERSON ACTUALLY NEED IN ORDER TO GET YOUR POINT?”

Figure 19. The gentle-but-always-correct wife/goofy husband trope was popularized in Chic Young’s widely read strip *Blondie*, beginning in 1930. (Last one, promise.)

⁵³ Kirtley, *Typical Girls*, 3.

⁵⁴ Kirtley, 3.

⁵⁵ Mort Walker’s seminal “Lexicon of Comicana” (1980) lists a series of “morphs” one can apply to their characters to instantly indicate type, including buck teeth to make a character look stupid, glasses to make them smart, a reflector on their forehead to indicate they’re a doctor, or a black eye mask to indicate they’re a thief. Walker, *The Lexicon of Comicana*, 20–23.

⁵⁶ Hernandez, “Funny Pages,” 13.

⁵⁷ Abel, Bob, *The Funnies an American Idiom*, 189.

⁵⁸ Spiegelman, Terwilliger, and Fearing, “The Content of Comic Strips,” 39.

of child-raising and housework. She was allowed to one-up her husband in gentle comic beats in exchange for serving his every need and assuring his leisure time after a long day at the office. She could assert her authority over the children in exchange for cleaning up their messes, absorbing the consequences of their mischief and mistakes, remaining available to their every material need, and lovingly accepting the regular usurping of that authority with good humour.

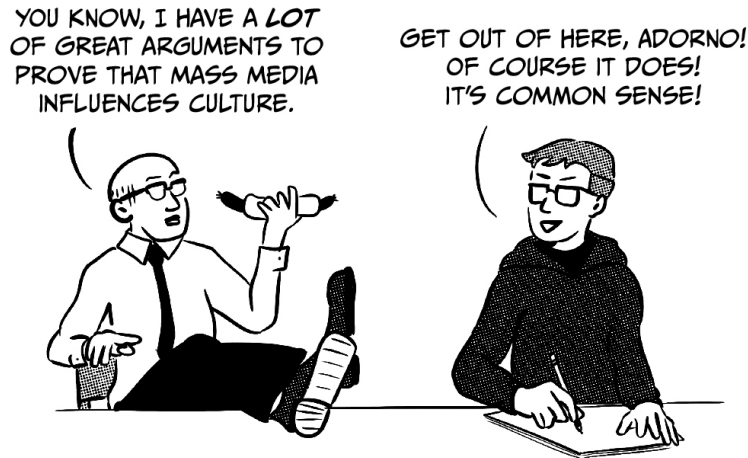


Figure 20. The medium of comics offers us a rich canvas for visual gags, puns, and hidden references, that play on things like the fact that “Frankfurt” sounds a lot like “frankfurter”

IT IS POPULARLY BELIEVED THAT THE ACTIVITIES PORTRAYED IN THE COMICS ARE QUITE REMOTE FROM REAL-LIFE PROBLEMS OF PEOPLE – ONLY PROVIDING “ESCAPE” AND “ENTERTAINMENT”. COMMUNICATIONS THEORY, ON THE OTHER HAND, HOLDS THAT ALL FORMS OF COMMUNICATION “STRUCTURE THE INDIVIDUAL’S WORLD” AND PROVIDE A FRAMEWORK FOR ACTION. THIS POSITION WOULD ALSO HOLD THAT EVEN COMIC STRIPS BOTH REFLECT AND MOLD CULTURAL PATTERNS AND BELIEFS.”⁵⁹

– ART SPIEGELMAN

We can see this model of motherhood reflected in popular understanding. In her book *Witches, Witch-Hunting, and Women*, Silvia Federici traces this model of domestic femininity, intrinsically linked to motherhood, back to its emergence alongside capitalism in the 16th and 17th centuries. Characterized as “sexless, obedient, submissive, resigned to subordination to the male world, accepting as natural the confinement to a sphere of activities that in capitalism has been completely devalued.”⁶⁰ While pre-Capitalist western society was far from matriarchal, this *particular* framework for family life saw women consigned to the home, restricted to the roles of wife and mother, and oversaw the devaluation of women’s knowledge and labour in fields like medicine, agriculture, and textile and material craft (to name a few). Women faced severe social and material consequences for any failure to conform – at the least, unmarried women faced abject poverty and social shunning, and at worst, torture and execution under charges of “witchcraft”. Witch hunts in the 17th century were used to impose a social code which severely punished any exercise of independence from the

⁵⁹ Spiegelman, Terwilliger, and Fearing, 39.

⁶⁰ Federici, *Witches, Witch-Hunting, and Women*, 27.

norms imposed by the state – a “tamed, domesticated femininity”⁶¹ compliant to patriarchal control, subservient to the project of childbirth, childrearing, and performing all housekeeping tasks necessary to maintain her husband’s comfort. Using the church as their instrument, patriarchal interests were able to cast nonconformity as the work of the devil – absolute evil incarnate on earth.⁶² This period oversaw a rapid deterioration of women’s social position as patriarchal authority solidified as the foundation of family structure.⁶³

Arguably, this model of the family, with its “natural” hierarchy organized under patriarchal authority, persists to this day. Adrienne Rich referred to it as “The Kingdom Of Fathers”⁶⁴ in her 1976 book *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*, in which she examines the forces and history that led to the model of motherhood she found herself living out, and which she found to be indefensible. She describes patriarchy as “a familial-social, ideological, political system in which men – by force, direct pressure, or through ritual, tradition, law, and language, customs, etiquette, education, and the division of labour, determine what part women shall or shall not play, and in which the female is everywhere subsumed under the male”.⁶⁵ Her description captures both the pervasiveness and the intractability of this model of family life. Despite whatever progress women, mothers and feminists have made to challenge this subjugation in the decades since Rich wrote these words, the “Kingdom Of Fathers” perseveres. In the first year of the Covid Pandemic, 865,000 women left the workforce in September in the United States alone in concurrence with school closures. In 2023, there were two million fewer women in the workforce than before the pandemic.⁶⁶ In an interview on the topic in DAMN Magazine, Sylvia Federici is quoted “The United States of America doesn’t have a safety net, it has mothers.”⁶⁷

Western conceptions of valorized, domesticated femininity are largely expressed by labour, both physical and mental, undertaken for the care of others – children, mainly, but also spouses, older parents and parents-in-law, pets, friends, struggling relatives, neighbours, the co-worker having a birthday, the coffee-hour at church, the guide troupe, the soccer team, the elementary class trip... the list goes on.⁶⁸ This archetype of woman-as-caregiver is intrinsic to our modern model of domesticated femininity. Adrienne Rich writes “in the eyes of society the mother *is* the child’s environment”.⁶⁹ This fight to impose control over women’s bodies, behaviour and time is enjoined by patriarchal powers and writ large through law, religion and economic forces. It is also reflected in, and perpetuated by, popular media like the funny pages.

The following case studies examine several distinct approaches to depicting motherhood in comics – Richard Outcault’s mother as comic foil and Bil Keane’s mother as heart of the household, as well as autobiographical and semi-fictionalized accounts of motherhood by Lynn Patterson, Lucy Knisley and A.K. Summers. All five cartoonists have used the medium of comics to paint a specific portrayal of motherhood which, I will argue, overlap significantly despite their wide variance in perspective, in time, and in the expressive project they undertake with their comics.

⁶¹ Federici, 29.

⁶² Federici, 22.

⁶³ Federici, 39.

⁶⁴ Rich, *Of Woman Born*, 56.

⁶⁵ Rich, 57.

⁶⁶ Kennedy, “Motherly Rage: An Conversation With Silvia Federici.”

⁶⁷ Kennedy.

⁶⁸ While writing this section, my sick-at-home six-year-old interrupted me fourteen times, with questions ranging from (but not limited to) “Where is the peanut butter?”, “Can I watch YouTube?”, “Can you give this doll pigtails?”, “What is heaven?”, “Can I give you a haircut?”, “How do you clean up peanut butter?” and “What should I do NOW?”.

⁶⁹ Rich, *Of Woman Born*, 53.

CASE STUDY 1: BUSTER BROWN

"WHEN I THINK I'M GOING TO MAKE A HIT IT'S ALWAYS THE TIME MA MAKES ONE"⁷⁰

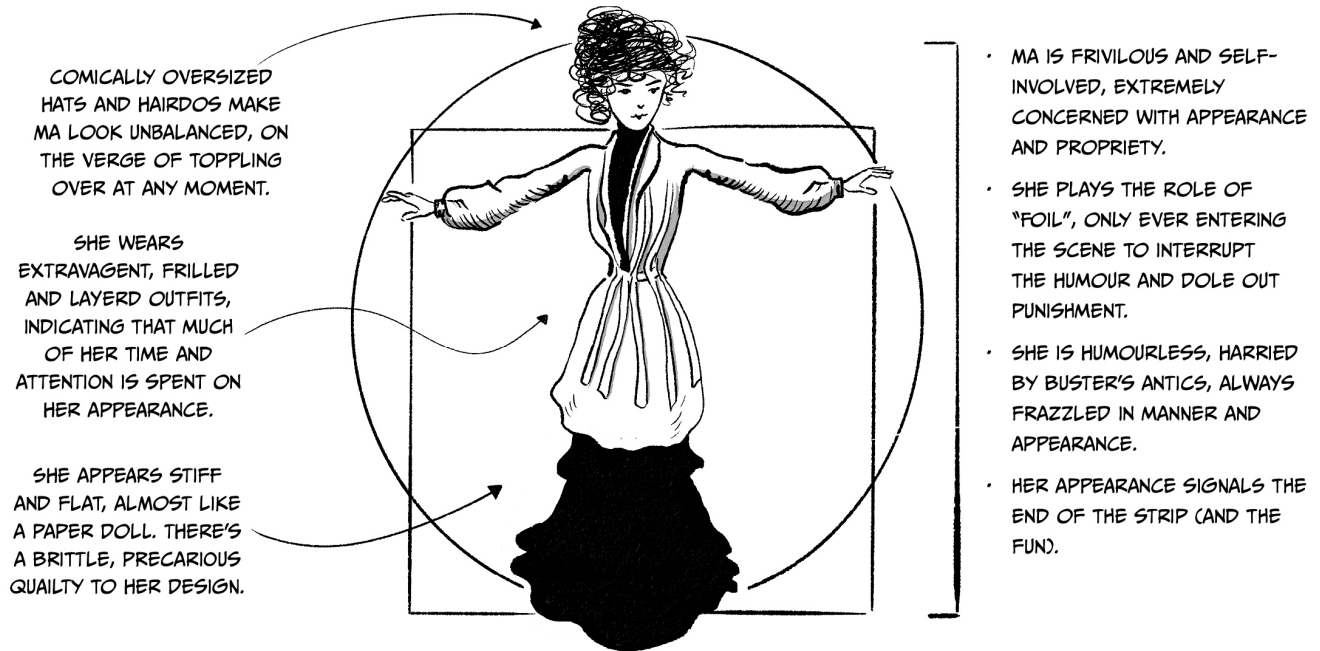


Figure 21. "Ma" from Richard Outcault's early 20th century comic strip "Buster Brown"

Buster Brown was the third ongoing strip created by comics pioneer Richard F. Outcault. Created at the height of a newspaper comic boom referred to as "the circulation wars,"⁷¹ *Buster Brown* premiered in the *New York Herald* in May 1902. The episodic strip focuses on the antics of a "Little Lord Fauntleroy-type rascal named Buster" who had "moved uptown from the slums of Hogan's Alley to far more genteel surroundings."⁷² Buster is an agent of chaos, introducing mess, disorder and dirt into an affluent, nouveau riche setting. While his motivations range from an honest desire to be helpful to a childish inability to resist temptation, he always comes off looking guileless and innocent. Whatever chaos he creates, the strips always end with Buster receiving punishment – either in the form of a spanking, or by being dragged off, presumably to receive his spanking off-panel.

Outcault created "Ma" to serve as Buster's foil – the ultimate ruiner-of-the-fun. She is presented as an authority but usually has her authority disregarded, resulting in the need for a spanking in order to reassert it. She's drawn in opulent lace and ruffles, precariously perched on high-heeled boots. She often enters stiffly raked at an implausible angle, literally inserted like a wedge into the action. Ma is the perpetual obstacle Buster must overcome to execute his plans.

Buster Brown ran in syndication for 19 years; his mother is never given a name.



Figure 22. An early *Buster Brown* panel



Figure 23. An early *Buster Brown* panel

⁷⁰ Outcault, *Buster Brown*.

⁷¹ Hess and Kaplan, *The Ungentlemanly Art: A History of American Political Cartoons*, 121.

⁷² Outcault, *Buster Brown*.

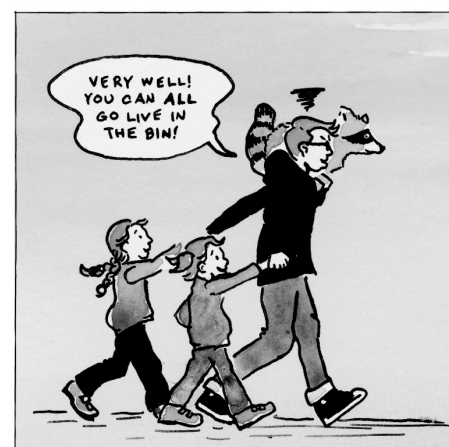
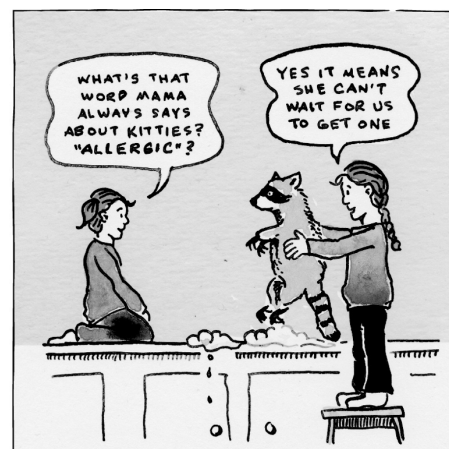
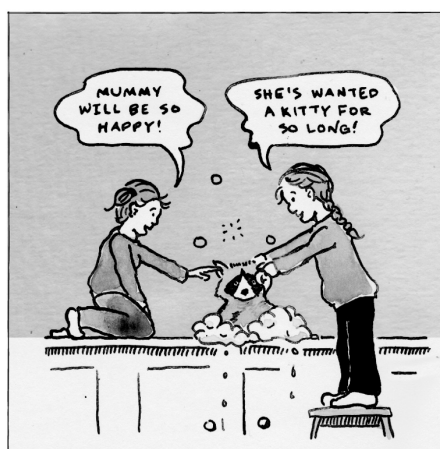
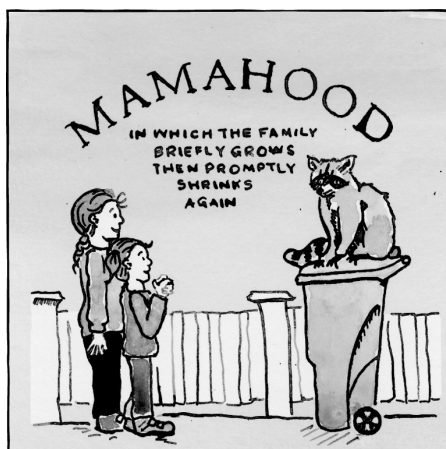


Figure 24. A "Mamahood" comic in Richard Outcault's style

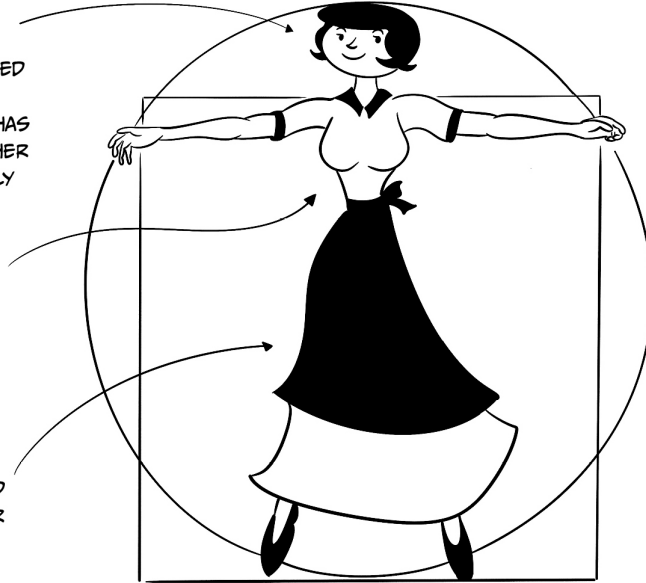
CASE STUDY 2: THE FAMILY CIRCUS

"IN AN AGE LIKE OURS, WHEN EVERY PART OF LIFE IS THOROUGHLY SUFFUSED WITH IRONY, THE ONLY THING THAT'S STRONGER IS SINCERITY."⁷³

THEL'S PRECISE-YET-PRACTICAL HAIRSTYLE AND SPECIFICALLY RENDERED VARIETY OF CLOTHING INDICATE THE CARTOONIST HAS PLACED SIGNIFICANCE ON HER APPEARANCE AND IT'S DAILY MAINTENANCE.

HER PROPORTIONS ADHERE TO TRADITIONAL BEAUTY STANDARDS, INDICATIVE OF A MALE GAZE.

SHE IS OFTEN COSTUMED IN AN APRON, OR SIMILAR ITEMS THAT INDICATE DOMESTIC LABOUR.



- TRADITIONALLY FEMININE
- CONVENTIONALLY BEAUTIFUL AND "PUT TOGETHER"
- CONSTANTLY ENGAGED IN CHILDCARE AND/OR DOMESTIC LABOUR
- TIED CLOSELY TO THE HOME, HER CONSTANT PRESENCE IS A SOURCE OF STABILITY, SECURITY, AND SUPPORT FOR THE OTHER MEMBERS OF THE HOUSEHOLD.
- THEL'S ROLE IS TO SACRIFICE HER OWN DESIRES AND COMFORT IN THE INTEREST OF THOSE OF HER HUSBAND AND CHILDREN.

Figure 25. "Thel", from Bil Keane's long-running comic "The Family Circus"

Bil Keane's *The Family Circus* debuted in syndication in 1960 and has been in continuous production every since. Keane continued to create single panel cartoons that captured sweet, sentimental, and humorous moments of family life, contained within his signature circular border, until his death in 2011. His son Jeff Keane, who provided the inspiration for three-year-old "Jeffy", took over the strip and, as of this writing, continues to produce daily cartoons in his father's style. According to King Features Syndicate (North America's largest distributor of newspaper comics) *The Family Circus* is the most widely circulated single panel cartoon in the world.⁷⁴

The Family Circus is often described using words like "genteel", "wholesome", "decent", and "neighbourly". The cartoons depict an idealized nuclear family and illustrate moments of humour and affection, usually between parents and children. The family is a direct analog to Keane's real-life family of four children. With the brief exception of baby PJ's arrival and rapid growth to 18 months in 1962, the fictional family has remained frozen in time since the strip's inception. While the strip occasionally depicts contemporary pop cultural references (music, tv shows), and had the family trade in their station wagon for a minivan in 1985, the aesthetic of *The Family Circus* has been one of retro-nostalgia, absolutely dependent on the building block of traditional gender roles.



"How long does it usually take Daddy to recover after we get a new baby?"

Figure 26. *Family Circus* © 1962 Bil Keane, Distributed by King Features Syndicate, Inc.



"Come on, Thel! Pick up that spare!"

Figure 27. *Family Circus* © 1963 Bil Keane, Distributed by King Features Syndicate, Inc.

⁷³ "In an Age like Ours, When Every Part of Life Is Thoroughly Suffused with Irony, the Only Thing That's Stronger Is Sincerity."

⁷⁴ Booker, *Comics through Time*, 576.

“Thel”, the comic’s stay-at-home mother, is usually shown engaged in housework of some kind, almost as though this is her default state of being. The strip’s heavy emphasis on stability and security in family life require the children’s adventures and mishaps to orbit around the ever-present figure of the mother, waiting at home to resolve conflicts, kiss boo boos, and receive her husband at the end of the work day.⁷⁵ She is put-upon but stalwart; she never complains out loud or refuses a request, but her expressions – often visible to the reader but unnoticed by her family members – belie weariness, frustration and even sometimes anger. Thel has been performing her domestic duties for sixty-five years without complaint.



“My Mama can take us.
She’s **always** available! Literally! Always!”

Figure 28. A “Mamahood” comic in Bil Keane’s style

⁷⁵ Keane’s creation of an archetypal housewife at the heart of this fantasy version of his real-life family is especially interesting given that, in reality, Thelma Keane handled all the licensing and syndication for *The Family Circus*, and generally managed all of their business interests – arguably to great success – while raising their four kids. (Astor, “A Cartoonist and His Household Words,” 45.)

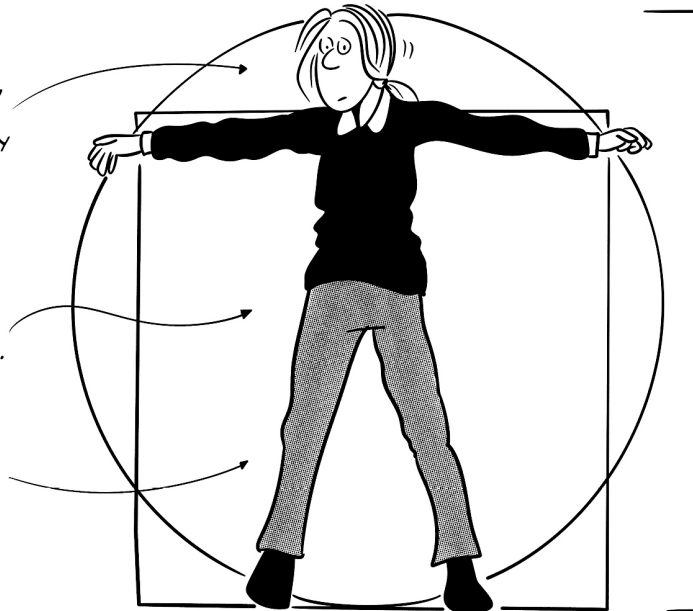
CASE STUDY 3: FOR BETTER OR FOR WORSE

"THE COMICS PAGE IS A POWERFUL COMMUNICATOR. I LEARNED THAT PEOPLE READ OUR WORK AND CARE ABOUT WHAT WE SAY. WE ALL LOOK FORWARD EVERY DAY TO THAT ONE PAGE IN THE PAPER WHERE THE SMALL TRUTHS LIE, HOPING FOR A LAUGH, OR A LITTLE SARCASM... THE COMICS MATTER A GREAT DEAL." -LYNN JOHNSTON⁷⁶

ELLY'S FACE AND HEAD ARE CARTOONED WITH SIMPLE, LOOSE, LOOPING STROKES, WHICH COMMUNICATE A FRAZZLED, ALWAYS SLIGHTLY BEWILDERED CHARACTER.

HER CLOTHING CHOICES ARE MODEST, DEMURE AND CONSERVATIVE, AND ALWAYS A LITTLE RUMPLED.

SHE IS USUALLY SLIGHTLY SLOUCHED, POSED TO INDICATE PHYSICAL WEARINESS.



- TRADITIONALLY FEMININE, BUT IN A WAY THAT DOESN'T COMMUNICATE VANITY OR SELF-INTEREST.
- SHE IS ALSO TIED CLOSELY TO THE HOME, HER PRESENCE IS A SOURCE OF STABILITY AND SUPPORT FOR THE OTHER MEMBERS OF THE FAMILY.
- ELLY OFTEN SEARCHES FOR, AND STRUGGLES TO FIND, FULFILLMENT OUTSIDE THE HOME. THESE ENDEAVOURS ARE FRAUGHT, AND SHORT-LIVED, AND A SOURCE OF CONFLICT WITHIN THE FAMILY.

Figure 29. "Elly" from Lynn Johnston's "For Better Or For Worse"

For Better Or For Worse was a loosely autobiographical serial strip by cartoonist Lynn Johnston that ran in syndication from 1979 to 2008, following the Patterson family through three decades of daily life. *For Better Or For Worse* was unique among serial comic strips in that, unlike *The Family Circus*, it was plainly set in the present day. As a result, Johnston's characters aged in real time. What started as a gag strip about the misadventures of parenting toddlers evolved over the years to a sprawling family serial. We meet the Patterson children – Michael and Elizabeth – as pre-schoolers; the strip concludes 29 years later with Elizabeth's wedding. Down to earth storylines that closely reflect Johnston's real life in the middle class of small town Ontario were often deeply emotional, and sometimes even controversial. Notable storylines include the aging and death of beloved family dog Farley, the discovery of child abuse in the home of a friend, and a 1993 story that caused several newspapers in Canada and the US to drop the strip entirely in which Michaels' childhood friend Lawrence comes out as gay.

Alongside her contemporary Cathy Guisewite (*Cathy*) Johnston's *For Better Or For Worse* broke ground on the modern iteration of a rare trend for the funny pages – real-world, drawn-

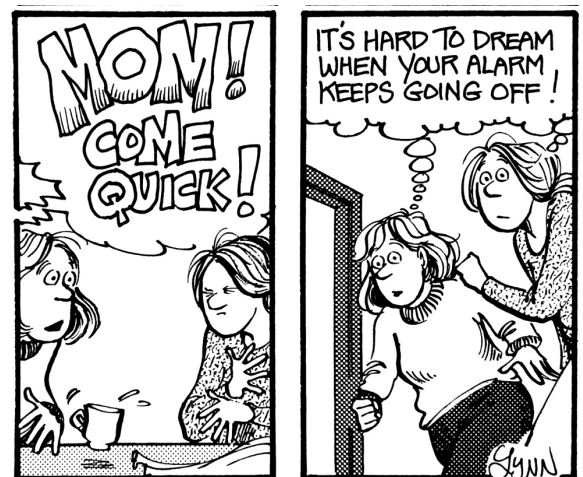


Figure 31. Elly Patterson demonstrating how difficult it is to find time for herself

⁷⁶ Kirtley, *Typical Girls*, 79.

from-life strips that centered the perspective of a woman protagonist by a woman creator. Following in the footsteps of pioneering greats Ethel Hays (*By Ethel*), Jackie Ormes (*Torchy Brown*), and the suspiciously named trailblazer Fay King (*Cartoonist's Confessional*),⁷⁷ Guisewite and Johnston bring their first-person perspective to stories of women's experiences, but while Guisewite centers her strip on dating, diet culture and the workplace, Lynn Johnston is firmly focused on home and family.

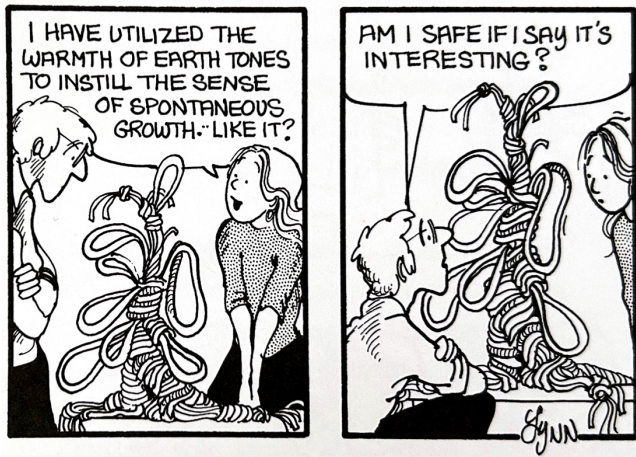


Figure 32. Elly's family was not always as supportive as one would hope of her artistic endeavours

As much as Johnston asks the reader to sympathize with Elly's struggle with the tedium and thanklessness of her every day, she is asking Elly to recognise and be grateful for her husband's attention, her children's love, and her comfortable middle-class life, whatever its inadequacies.

Lynn Johnston walked a precarious line with *For Better Or For Worse*. By the mid-80s, the strip's popularity had exploded, and the business had expanded to include animated television specials, licensed products, and books. Her studio employed a staff of six, and her husband had abandoned his dental practice to manage the business, making her the family's sole breadwinner. While she was given much freedom to take the *For Better Or For Worse* newspaper strip in whatever direction she chose, keeping the strip within a certain window of palatability was the only way to secure the livelihood it afforded her, her family, and her employees. "Cartoonists, like anyone else, have a "boss". For Lynn's comic strip, the boss was Universal Press Syndicate".⁷⁹ To their credit, Universal Press Syndicate supported Johnston as she explored many storylines that were considered controversial at the time. It's worth noting, though, that the one constant through 30 years of the Pattersons' life was the centering of Elly's role as caregiver – to her children, her husband, her dog, the neighbourhood kids, her aging parents, her unemployed brother... Elly's duty of care, often at the expense of her own desires, underpins the series at every stage.⁸⁰



Figure 33. Elly's brother lets her know he expects to become an indefinite houseguest.

⁷⁷ "She Changed Comics: Pre-Code & Golden Age – Comic Book Legal Defense Fund."

⁷⁸ Kirtley, *Typical Girls*, 74.

⁷⁹ Johnston et al., *For Better or for Worse*, 144.

⁸⁰ All panels excerpted from *For Better or for Worse: The Comic Art of Lynn Johnston* copyright © 2015 by Lynn Johnston Productions Inc. Reprinted by permission of Goose Lane Editions. For more information, please visit www.gooselane.com.



Figure 34. A "Mamahood" comic inspired by Lynn Johnston

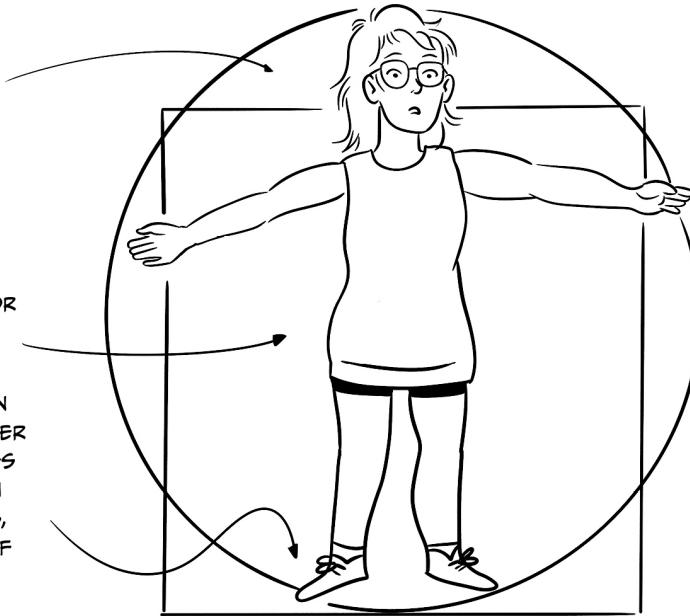
CASE STUDY 4: GO TO SLEEP (I MISS YOU)

"IT WAS THIS HUGE RELIEF TO FIND SO MANY PEOPLE THAT RELATED TO MY COMICS, AND SO MUCH POWER IN CLAIMING THE MUSE OF MOTHERHOOD!"⁸¹ – LUCY KNISLEY

THE CHARACTER DESIGN IS AN EXPLICIT SELF-PORTRAIT, INTENDED, UNAMBIGUOUSLY, TO REFLECT THE CARTOONIST'S VIEW OF HERSELF.

SIMPLE, LOOSE LINE DRAWING WITH MINIMAL OR NO USE OF TONE.

KNISLEY'S SKILL AS AN ILLUSTRATOR ALLOWS HER TO BALANCE PRINCIPLES OF CARTOONING WITH A REALISTIC LIKENESS, TO ACHIEVE A SORT OF CARTOON REALISM.



- SHE IS NOT PURSUING TRADITIONAL COMIC-BEAUTY STANDARDS OR DRAWING FOR THE MALE-GAZE, HOWEVER, KNISLEY REMAINS SPECIFICALLY FEMININE.
- SHE IS "DRESSED DOWN" IN COMFORTABLE CLOTHES, OFTEN SEEN GETTING MESSY.
- HER PRESENCE IS INTIMATELY TIED TO THAT OF HER INFANT. THEIR CONNECTION - TACTILE AND BIOLOGICAL - IS CENTRAL TO THIS WORK.
- HER PHYSICAL BODY IS PRESENTED AS A RESOURCE THAT CREATED AND SUSTAINS HER SON.

Figure 35. "Lucy" from Lucy Knisley's *Go To Sleep (I Miss You)*

Go To Sleep (I Miss You) is a collection of short diary comics, chosen from a series of Instagram posts Lucy Knisley made after the birth of her son in 2016. Knisley is an accomplished graphic novelist whose bibliography includes travelogues, memoirs, two middle-grade fiction books, and two children's picture books (and counting). Her work has always drawn from her real life, either directly or, in the case of her fictional works, as a strong inspiration.

The book was warmly received, particularly in the media-realm known as "mommy blogs". Mommy blogs, or the world of "Momfluencers", is a broad and multifaceted internet subculture in which (typically cis-, usually straight) women create public content about their experiences of mothering. This work is sometimes monetized, but often positioned as a personal project undertaken to combat the isolation and boredom that accompanies stay-at-home parenthood. These blogs can be valuable community builders and sources of information sharing. "In their heyday, mommy bloggers bitched, they snarked, they talked about postpartum depression. They made a huge impact on normalizing the harder, bloodier, more taboo sides of motherhood."⁸² On the flip side, of course, they can be virulent drivers of misinformation, and can play a role in upholding unattainable standards of idealized motherhood. But at their best, these blogs "create vibrant, inclusive, engaged online communities that speak to vital issues impacting mothers",⁸³ and are an invaluable resource and source of support to new moms.



Figure 36. Chapter two, "Chow Time" chronicles the ups and downs of breastfeeding

⁸¹ "Lucy Knisley Launches 'Go To Sleep (I Miss You)' for New Parents."

⁸² Petersen, *Momfluenced*, 5.

⁸³ Petersen, 7.

Knisley's post-birth cartoons straddle both the world of mommy blogs and the world of comics. They sit firmly within the tradition of the diary comic – quick, observational, loosely-rendered, introspective, personally reflective, and (initially) self-published. Thematically, they balance an unvarnished look at the exhausting, messy, sticky, laborious grind of new-motherhood with feelings of wonder and adoration, gentle humour,

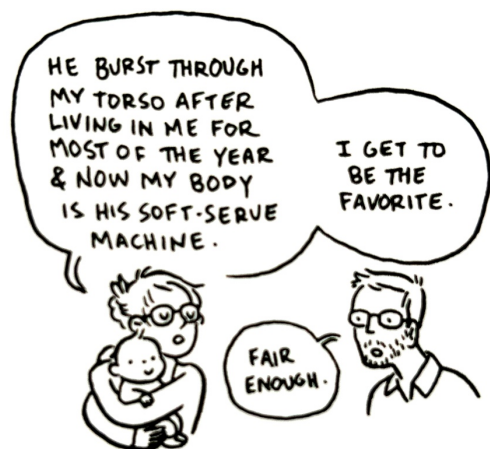


Figure 37. The physicality and embodied nature of Knisley's connection to her infant son is ever-present.

a kind of chuckling resignation to repeated calls to ignore her own needs and desires, and an incredibly cute cartoon baby. In the book's introduction, she frames her creative practice as a kind of self-care. "Having previously used drawing as a way to understand the world, I was now using it to discover a completely new world... which felt at once bafflingly foreign and very sweet."⁸⁴ A sense of foreignness permeates many of these cartoons, expressed as an alienation from her own body and it's needs. She often depicts herself being peed or thrown up on, scratched, used as a mattress, and physically hurt by the challenges of breastfeeding. These difficulties are always presented with a gentle, loving, comic resignation which holds her infant blameless (obviously) and accepts these adversities as just part of the deal of parenting.

Knisley speaks openly about the role this creative

project played for her – "These little sketchbook cartoons are my effort to feel less alone and crazy at a time when most people feel alone and crazy", adding "I hope they keep you company during late-night feeds."⁸⁵ There is no question who her imagined audience is, and while she doesn't explicitly indicate "late-night feeds" refers to breastfeeding, many of the cartoons that follow are about breastfeeding specifically.

While Knisley is very clear about how this practice supported her in new-parenthood, she was at first reluctant to share them, stating "I'd internalized a lot of fear about what it meant to be a mother and a professional artist, and worried that sharing these comics publicly would destabilize my career".⁸⁶ While her comics speak to the immediate, everyday pressures and challenges of motherhood, this statement speaks to the broader pressure Knisley was under to downplay, or even hide, her role as mother from an industry that may not let her be both mother and professional, or would insist her professional output remain tied to her role as mother going forward. While her post-2020 works have not been directly autobiographical they've remained centered on the world of childhood as she's expanded her practice beyond memoir into middle-grade fiction and children's picture books. Much like the work of Lynn Johnston, we can see a genuine, personal creative drive to make work out of one's own lived experience, but can't discount the economic and professional forces that influence and limit the directions that drive can take.



Figure 38. These comics were a testament to Knisley's ability to multitask.

⁸⁴ Knisley, *Go to Sleep (I Miss You)*, 2.

⁸⁵ Knisley, 3.

⁸⁶ "Lucy Knisley Launches 'Go To Sleep (I Miss You)' for New Parents."



Figure 39. A “Mamahood” comic inspired by the work of Lucy Knisley

CASE STUDY 5: PREGNANT BUTCH

"IT TURNED OUT THAT I HAD ASSETS THAT LEGITIMISED ME: I WAS MY CHILD'S BIRTH MOTHER."⁸⁷ – A.K. SUMMERS

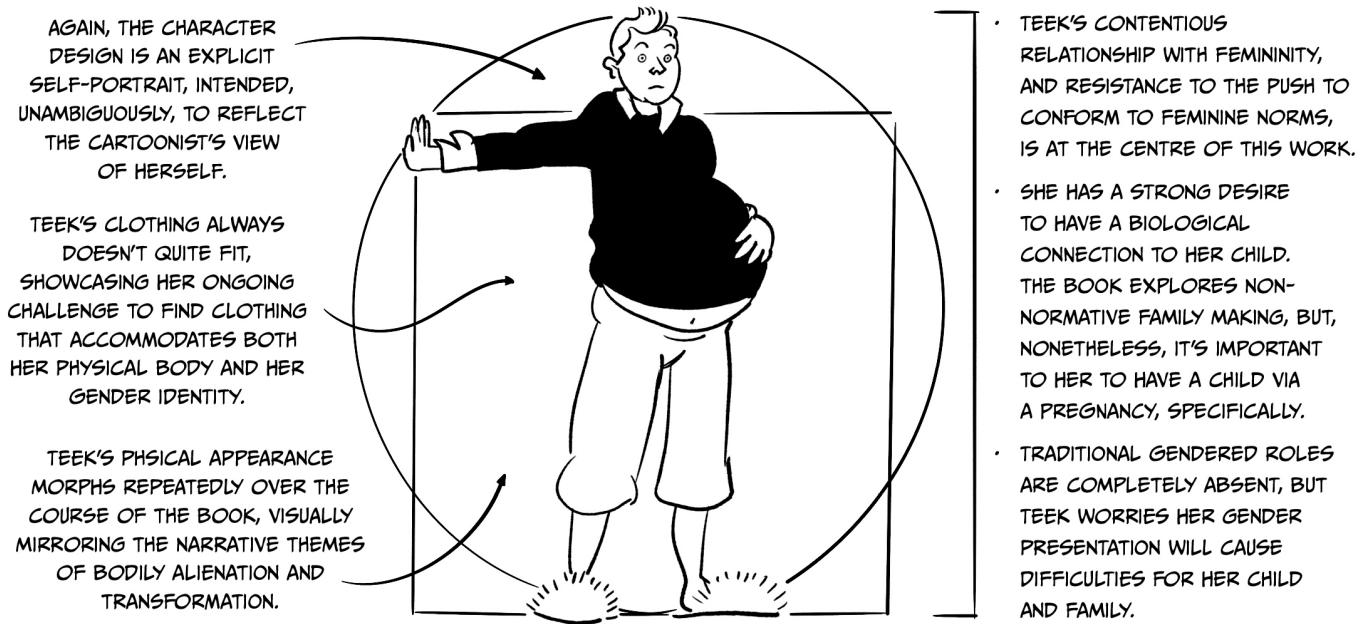


Figure 40. "Teek" from A.K. Summers's *Pregnant Butch*

A.K. Summer's *Pregnant Butch* (2014) anticipated a publishing trend in pregnancy memoirs that would not fully gain prominence until 2019, when Lucy Knisley's *Kid Gloves: Nine Months of Careful Chaos* kicked things off, forging a path for a corpus of works like Teresa Wong's *Dear Scarlett*, Sylvia Nickerson's *Creation*, Vinita Ramani and Griselda Gabriele's *Bearing Witness*, and *Two-Week Wait: An IVF Story* by Luke and Kelly Jackson, that explored the physical, emotional, and medical realities faced by women and couples pursuing and experiencing pregnancies. *Pregnant Butch* is unique among pregnancy memoirs in that, alongside its exploration of Summer's (aka "Teek's") physical experience of pregnancy, it confronts concerns that are specific to a queer, gender-nonconforming pregnant woman. It presents a model of family-making characteristic of, and reliant on, queer kinship relationships, including (but not limited to) negotiating the terms of sperm donation with an old friend, processing the role of the non-gestational mother, and constantly correcting everyone from medical professionals to strangers on the subway about the make-up of her family.

Visually, *Pregnant Butch* sits comfortably in the aesthetic tradition of underground comix. The art is stark black and white with only occasional flat grey tones. The mark-making retains the shape of various marker nibs, the artist's hand is plainly evident. Hand-lettered text is crammed into already-full panels, without too much attention spent on precise justification one way or the other. We move seamlessly back and forth between anecdotal narratives set in the real world and visual metaphors that express imagined fears and fantasies. The influence of queer underground cartoonists like Roberta Gregory (*Bitchy Butch*), Dianne Dimassa (*Hothead Paisan*) and Jennifer Camper (*Rude Girls and Dangerous Women*) is clearly observable in the compositional approach, the frankly

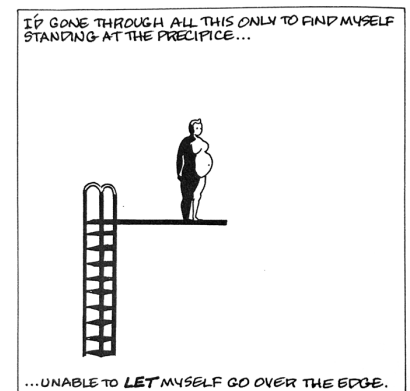


Figure 41. A.K. Summers demonstrates her singular skill with visual metaphor. (Reprinted with permission.)

⁸⁷ Murali, "I Set out to Make a Comic That I Would Want to Read," 299.

rendered naked bodies, the contemporary urban setting, the self-referential humour, and the wryly sort-of-self-deprecating-sort-of-judgemental-of-everyone-else tone. By embracing the conventions of underground comics so completely, this quick, curated chaos invokes their tradition as subversive, counter-cultural artifacts.

While the book focuses more on Teek's experience of pregnancy than of motherhood, the spectre of queer, gender-nonconforming motherhood, and her ideas about "good" mothers, looms large throughout. We enter the story with her desire to have a child via pregnancy firmly in place, but are given occasional hints about what drives this desire. When a doctor suggests she act as surrogate to her partner's harvested egg, fertilized using anonymous sperm, as a way to ensure legal parenthood for both mothers, she reacts in alarm. "I... I was **adopted**. I really want a **biological connection** to my child" she replies, as the narration likens the doctor's suggestion to a "sci-fi movie about Hitler clones."⁸⁸ The narration is glib, obviously, but the sentiment is clear – a biological connection to her child, achieved via pregnancy, is central to her conception of motherhood.

As much as *Pregnant Butch* was a personal creative project, Summers is clear that her goals were broader than straightforward self-expression. In a 2024 interview in "The Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics", she addressed both the risk *and* the necessity of telling queer stories of parenthood.

"There's fear and vulnerability involved in allowing these areas to be seen by people outside of the LGBTQ+ community – particularly where children are concerned. Historically, LGBTQ+ people have experienced threats to custody, danger and/or interference from schools, social services, law enforcement, neighbours, families of origin. Gay sexuality and parenthood are not safe to show in combination to the mainstream. We still find ourselves 'proving' that we are responsible, credible, legitimate caretakers of children – not pederasts or malign influences. So acknowledging gender and sexuality in the context of children feels risky, sometimes IS risky."⁸⁹

Cartoonist and scholar Justin Hall elucidates this call to action in the book's foreword: "it is the job of the mainstream to normalize and assimilate queer characters into the overall fabric of their stories, but it remains the job of the LGBTQ comics underground to celebrate, analyze, and shed light on the profound complexities of queer experiences from an insider's perspective".⁹⁰ Much like Lynn Johnston set out to illustrate the full, complex humanity of the Western housewife in the funny pages, and Lucy Knisley sent her unglamorous, unvarnished, slightly sticky portrait of early-motherhood into the world in search of community, A.K. Summers gives readers an intimate look at "the psychic discomforts of pregnancy and its straitjacket of societal expectations"⁹¹ from an explicitly, uniquely and unapologetically queer perspective, illustrating her experience in a way that, as Justin Hall describes, "sheds light on a reality outside of most readers' experience, but ... in seeming contradiction, has a profound universality."⁹² It is this universality, and the points of connection it creates, that Summers hopes will challenge people's assumptions and broaden their understanding of how families are made, and who counts as a mother. This is an extremely worthwhile project; however, of all the assumptions and biases it *does* challenge, the one that it never takes up is *why* biological motherhood is elevated, held up as ideal, and invulnerable to challenges to its legitimacy in public perception⁹³.



Figure 42. It seems invasive questions are a universal aspect of queer family-making. (Reprinted with permission.)

⁸⁸ Summers, *Pregnant Butch*, 18.

⁸⁹ Murali, "I Set out to Make a Comic That I Would Want to Read."

⁹⁰ Summers, *Pregnant Butch*, 1.

⁹¹ Murali, "I Set out to Make a Comic That I Would Want to Read," 301.

⁹² Summers, *Pregnant Butch*, 1.

⁹³ And that's OKAY! This book does a LOT, it doesn't have to do everything. It's a really important book, go read it.

A WALK IN THE PARK

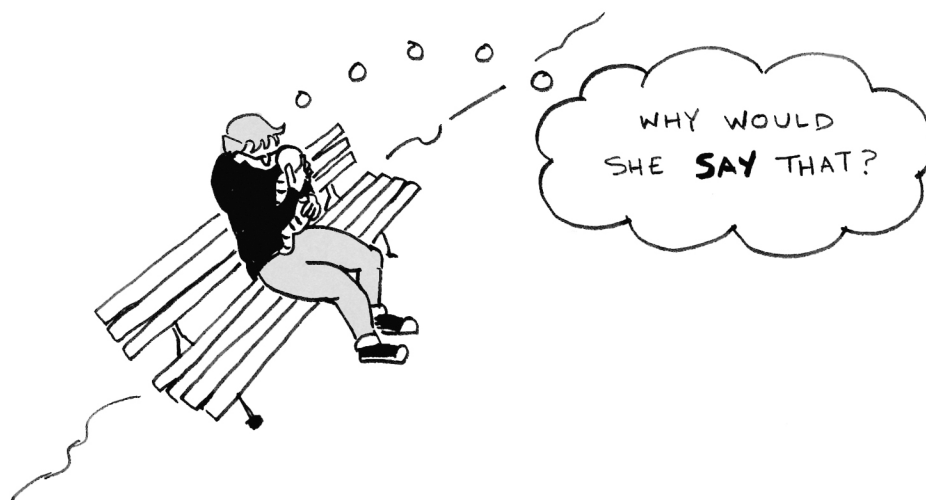


Figure 43. A "Mamahood" comic inspired by the work of A.K. Summers

WHAT COMICS HAVE TAUGHT ME ABOUT BEING A "GOOD MOTHER"

These case studies (and, you know, life on this planet) illustrate a series of base assumptions and essential qualities that characterize the Western cultural norm of the "good mother", or, even, a "valid" mother. Despite their vastly different positionalities, these five cartoonists have all situated their mother characters *somewhere* in relation to this norm and, in doing so, bolstered its hold on Western imagination. The four elements of this idealized model of motherhood I would like to unpack, specifically, are self-sacrifice, domestic femininity, physical appearance and presentation, and biological/embodied connection to the child.

Self-Sacrifice

Each of these comics engages with the idea that a mother's needs must be made secondary to that of their children's. Outcault, arguably, has created the only intentionally "bad" mother of this sample set. Ma's desire to maintain the outward appearance of control, calm, and bourgeois elegance is her main motivation. She punishes Buster when he disrupts this control, and never engages directly with his wellbeing.

Thel's relationship with self-sacrifice goes largely unexamined in Bil Keane's fifty-year tenure. Rather, Thel's exhaustion and frustration is simply assumed to be a given in family life, and is often presented as a punchline.

Elly Patterson, on the other hand, makes self-sacrifice a central theme of *For Better Or For Worse*. We see Elly

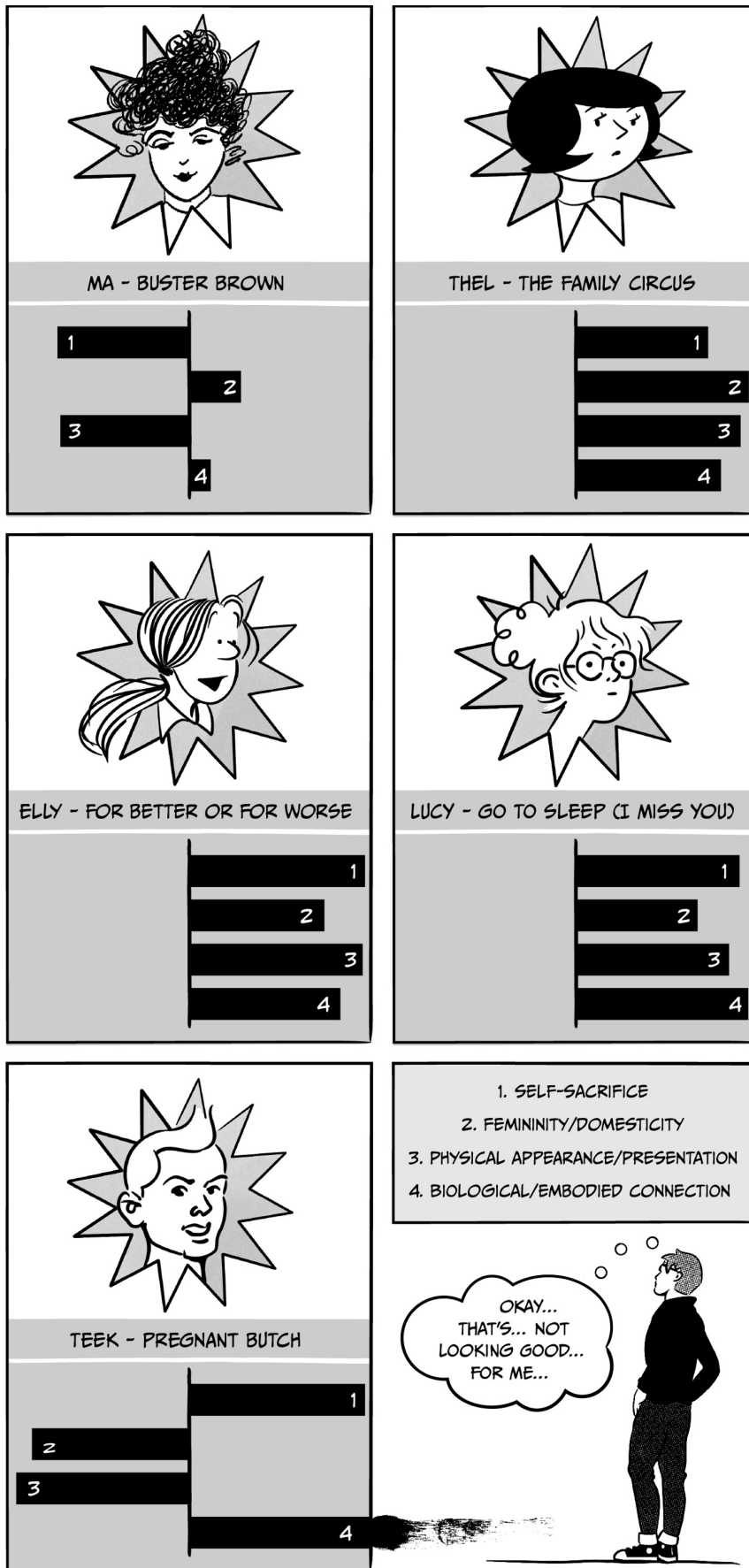


Figure 44. Motherhood scorecards



Figure 45. The self-sacrifice scale.

experience desire for, and experiment with, avenues for creative and professional fulfillment, and a life outside the domestic sphere. We also see her family's needs continually reassert themselves, at the expense of her explorations. *For Better Or For Worse* may have been the first to put a mother at the centre of the story, but the challenges and pressures she grappled with always put her desires in the back seat.

Lucy Knisley's autobiographical work tackles the idea of self-sacrifice with humour and affection. She continually illustrates moments like frustrated desires to move from under her sleeping infant, the infliction of minor injuries to her body, and thwarted yearning for sleep. Her entire narrative project explores the de-prioritization of her own comfort and desires in favour of her baby's needs.

Apart from a brief epilogue, *Pregnant Butch* shows us very little of Teek's time as a mother. Summer's instead focusses on her desire to become, and journey to becoming, a mother. The concept of sacrifice is no less valorized, however. Teek willingly shoulders the burden of deep dysphoria, endlessly frustrating and humiliating interactions with medical professionals, and constant irritating and offensive social interactions in pursuit of motherhood. Teek sacrifices her peace and comfort and endures a variety of physical indignities and pains for a child who, at this point, is still hypothetical.



Figure 46. The domestic femininity scale

The specific femininity innate to motherhood is one tied directly to domesticity and domestic labour. Unpaid domestic labour and subservience to a bread-winning husband underpins the entire project of the nuclear family. This labour includes childcare, but also house-cleaning, managing household supplies, cooking and ensuring that leisure time remains available to the working husband. Adrienne Rich categorizes the nuclear family by "its division of labor by gender, its emotional, physical, and material possessiveness, its ideal of monogamous marriage until death (and its severe penalties for adultery by the wife), the "illegitimacy" of a child born outside wedlock, the economic dependency of women, the unpaid domestic services of the wife, the obedience of women and children to male authority, [and] the imprinting and continuation of heterosexual roles".⁹⁴ While these gender roles, especially in the realm of work and

⁹⁴ Rich, *Of Woman Born*, 48.

income-earning, have become a little porous over the course of the last century, each of our comic-mothers is positioned against the housewife archetype one way or another.

Domestic labour plays a different role in *Buster Brown* – Ma doesn’t engage in cooking and cleaning directly, but rather takes charge of the household servants who fulfill those roles. We do see her shopping, sometimes for own enjoyment (clothes, shoes) and sometimes for the household (food). Buster’s father is not present in these strips, but Ma is clearly presented as in-charge of and responsible for the workings of the home.

Thel, meanwhile, is almost always pictured performing either childcare, housework, or a combination of the two in response to a spectacular mess the kids have created. Meanwhile, Keane spends considerable time illustrating her clothing, figure and hair as pleasing and traditionally attractive. Thel embodies the housewife archetype with comprehensive accuracy, in a way that never questions, troubles or subverts it.

The storytelling in *For Better Or For Worse* is broader in both scope and timeframe than *The Family Circus*, and is focussed more on the emotional realities of the Patterson family than the humorous and gently ironic minutiae of family life. Still, Elly’s relationship to chores like cooking and laundry are frequently part of the plot, and her role as caregiver – to her husband and children, but also her parents, in-laws, brother, pets and assorted neighbourhood children – is central to *For Better Or For Worse*’s story-world.

Lucy Knisley’s contemporary work shows us an updated relationship to domesticity. Knisley’s work outside the domestic realm and pursuit of creative fulfillment is inescapable – *Go To Sleep (I Miss You)* is evidence of both. These short, mostly single panel cartoons, all set over a short period of time, don’t give us a complete picture of Knisley’s household and family life, however, to the extent that domestic labour is present we see it being shared between Lucy and her husband.

Troubling notions of femininity, especially as crucial to motherhood, is central to the project undertaken in *Pregnant Butch*. Domestic labour is uncoupled from gender roles in Teek and Vee’s household, but the notion of (shared) domestic labour shows up in their sometimes-frantic efforts to prepare their home for a baby. Summers takes care to illustrate a definitive break from the patriarchy within the walls of their home by having a pregnant Teek undertake chores like carpentry and plumbing, and by showing Vee working to balance the demands of her work with her involvement in the project of their pregnancy and in Teek’s physical and medical care.

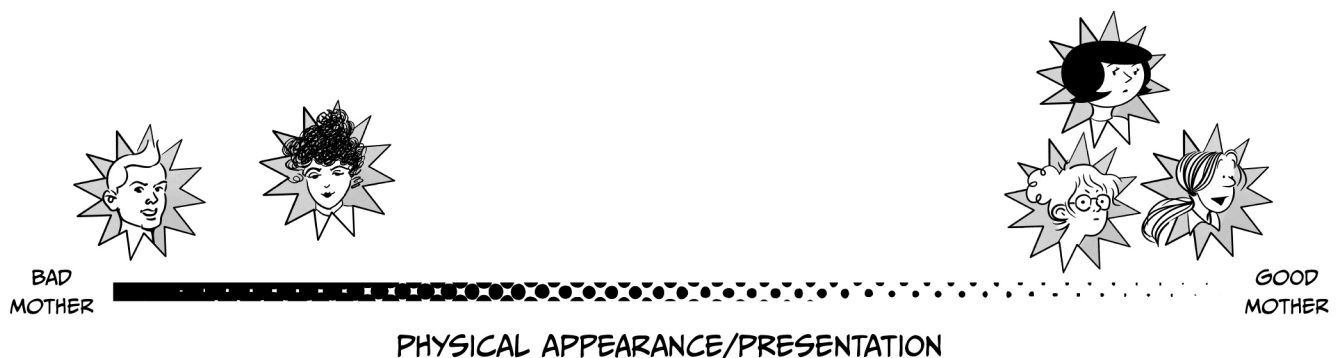


Figure 47. The physical appearance and presentation scale. There are multiple ways to get this one wrong!

The wealthy, opulent setting of *Buster Brown* is writ large in Ma’s lavish fashion. Her appearance is meant to communicate self-indulgence, vanity and frivolity, further cementing her as a “bad” mother figure. Thel, on the other hand, does engage with fashion, but her attractiveness is clearly oriented towards a male-gaze and connected to her role in the home and her desire to please her husband.

Lynn Johnston renders Elly’s carefully calibrated rumples to communicate weariness, and carefully balances her appearance between slightly conservative, imminently practical, and doubtlessly feminine. Elly is an archetypical middle-class mother who cares about her appearance *just* enough – she can dress up when the occasion arises (usually an evening with her husband’s colleagues) but does not spend time on her hair and clothing on a regular day. Lucy Knisley’s comic self-portraits sit nicely alongside Lynn Johnston’s – sensible and feminine, considered but not *too* considered, practically constructed, comfortable, oriented towards the duties of childcare.

Teek’s physical appearance plays a significant narrative role in *Pregnant Butch*. The mismatch between Teek’s butch gender presentation and her pregnancy – a state perceived as quintessentially feminine by many in her orbit – is at the heart of her journey. This struggle is an internal one, too. Summers defines “butch” as “masculine-identified people who still nominally consider themselves a ‘kind’ of woman.”⁹⁵ The physical changes she undergoes, as well as being perceived as and treated like an (unqualified) woman, is really challenging for Teek.

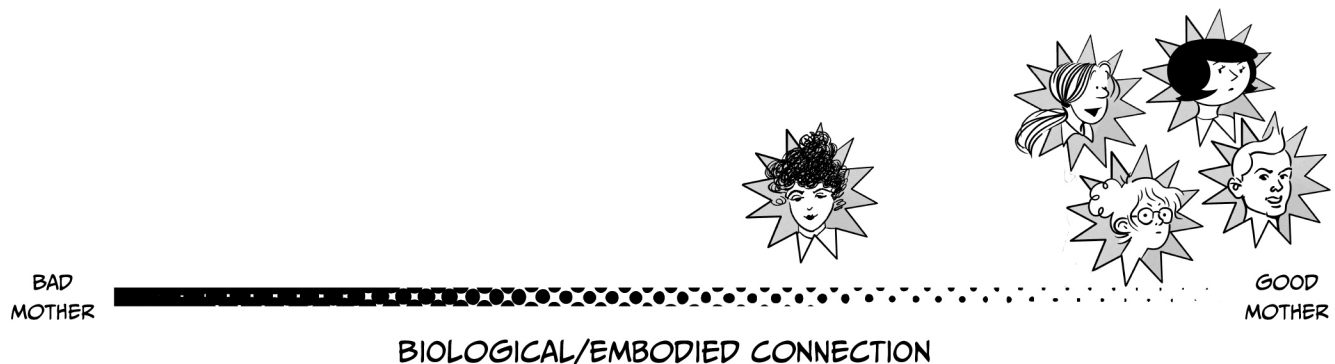


Figure 48. The biological/emodied connection scale.

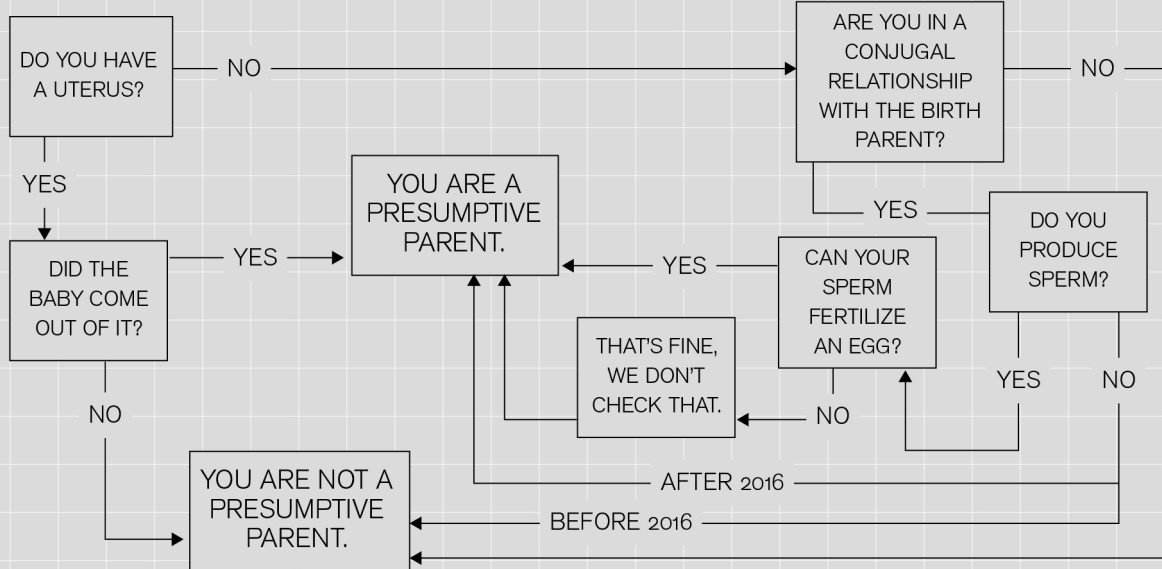
The circumstances of Buster Brown’s birth aren’t discussed in Outcault’s strips, but we can assume the authority that Ma exerts over Buster comes from her having given birth to him. She also regularly asserts control over his body in the form of physical punishment. Not a favourable picture, but the embodied connection is certainly present.

Bil Keane spent 1962–3 illustrating Thel’s pregnancy and the birth of their youngest child, PJ. Over the cartoon’s long history, not much time is spent exploring Thel’s experience of embodiment, but her biological connection to the children, and her body’s role in the family’s creation, is a given. Similarly, Elly Patterson experienced pregnancy and gave birth to baby April in 1991. In both cases, pregnancy, childbirth, breastfeeding and sleeplessness – and the mother’s duty to endure all of these things without allowing them to interrupt her duties to her older children, husband and household – is presented without interrogation, as a fact of family life. It is simply what one does.

Knisley’s work does some work to disrupt this dynamic. We see her husband/the baby’s father engaged in childcare, we see her expect and receive support from him. Her body, however, is absolutely central to the narrative here. At times she seems to disassociate from her own body, referring to it simply as a resource in service of her baby’s needs. Beyond recounting the intense and laborious act of breastfeeding, she endures endless injury, discomfort and indignity, and her child is almost constantly physically connected to her. Their bond is, unquestionably, both biological and somatic.

⁹⁵ Murali, “I Set out to Make a Comic That I Would Want to Read,” 300.

ARE YOU PRESUMED TO BE A PARENT?



Our legal definition of parenthood is built on the concept of the nuclear family as well. There are multiple legal paths by which one can obtain legal parenthood status (adoption, declarations of parenthood), but without an automatic legal presumption of parenthood, each of these methods requires time, money, the ability to navigate our system of family law without barriers (language, ability, etc.) and, crucially, consent from the child's legal, presumed parents.

In the case of the person who gives birth to the child, presumption of parenthood is automatic regardless of whether or not they provided the reproductive material from which the child was conceived. In the case of surrogacy, the birthing person has to actively relinquish their claim to parenthood, which requires a legal contract and proof of independent legal consultation before the child was conceived.⁹⁶

The All Families Are Equal Act of 2016 amended family law in Ontario to account for scenarios in which people donate sperm, even non-anonymously and outside a clinic setting, but do not intend to become parents. Now, there is no automatic presumption of parenthood as long as the donor and the birth parent agree in writing before the child is conceived that neither intend for the donor to be a parent. When a child is conceived using donor sperm, the birth parent's spouse, regardless of gender, is the child's presumed parent. As of this writing, up to four parents can have presumed legal status as long as they have entered into a written pre-conception parenting agreement and are either the birth parent, the sperm donor, or one of their spouses.⁹⁷

⁹⁶ "Children's Law Reform Act, R.S.O. 1990, c. C.12 | Ontario.Ca."

⁹⁷ "All Families Are Equal Act (Parentage and Related Registrations Statute Law Amendment), 2016, S.O. 2016, c. 23 - Bill 28 | Ontario.Ca."

A biological connection to her child is established to be of great importance to Teek in *Pregnant Butch*. This fact drives the entire narrative and seems to be the sole reason Teek is willing to take on all the burden's and discomforts the book explores. She doesn't talk much, though, about *why* this matters, beyond one panel that establishes this as somehow in reaction to her own history as an adopted child. Teek's physical body is the site of most of the book's conflict – physical vulnerability, gender dysphoria, finding clothes to wear, and fear that her body will not perform the task that's being asked of it underscore the entire story of Teek's journey to motherhood.

SO... AM I A "GOOD MOTHER"?

Finding space for myself in motherhood stories has been a daunting task. Despite the fact that I feel excluded by these stories, I feel strongly that they are important. This leaves me in the odd position of feeling intense solidarity with these women, while simultaneously being unable to find my way into the club. Lynn Johnston took up feminist critiques of the nuclear family and asked us to see the housewife's full humanity, even if she didn't ever fully revolt against the patriarchal norms that dictated her choices. Lucy Knisley pushed back against oppressive, picture-perfect idealism by presenting unembellished mess, pain and discomfort, even if her vision is underpinned by a kind of fuzzy, magical, affectionate resignation. A.K. Summers asked us to broaden our assumptions about who gets to want to have a baby, and decouple pregnancy and gender, even if she never interrogates why biology is central to her conception of motherhood. By enduring the pain and indignity of pregnancy, she *earns* the title of mother that might otherwise be denied her.

My family doesn't look like Bil Keane's family, or any of the families in the funny pages. I'm not a birth parent, I didn't breastfeed. I'm not very good at keeping house, and my gender presentation separates me visually from most of the mothers around me. More than that, these factors served as unavoidable reminders – to me and everyone I encountered – that my life experience and path to parenthood was different from the norm, which made my claim to the title just a little dubious at best, fully contestable at worst. This left me navigating the social landscape and institutional structures of stay-at-home parenthood as a person missing most of the expected external markers of motherhood.

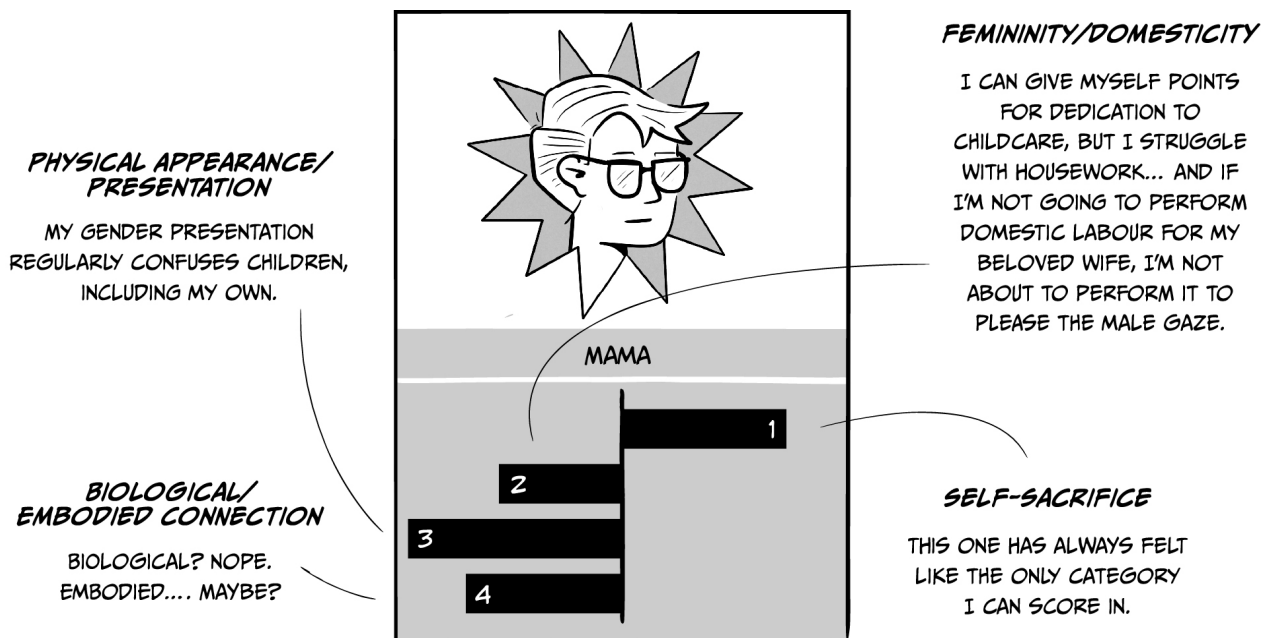


Figure 51. My motherhood scorecard

DO I HAVE AN EMBODIED CONNECTION TO MY CHILDREN?

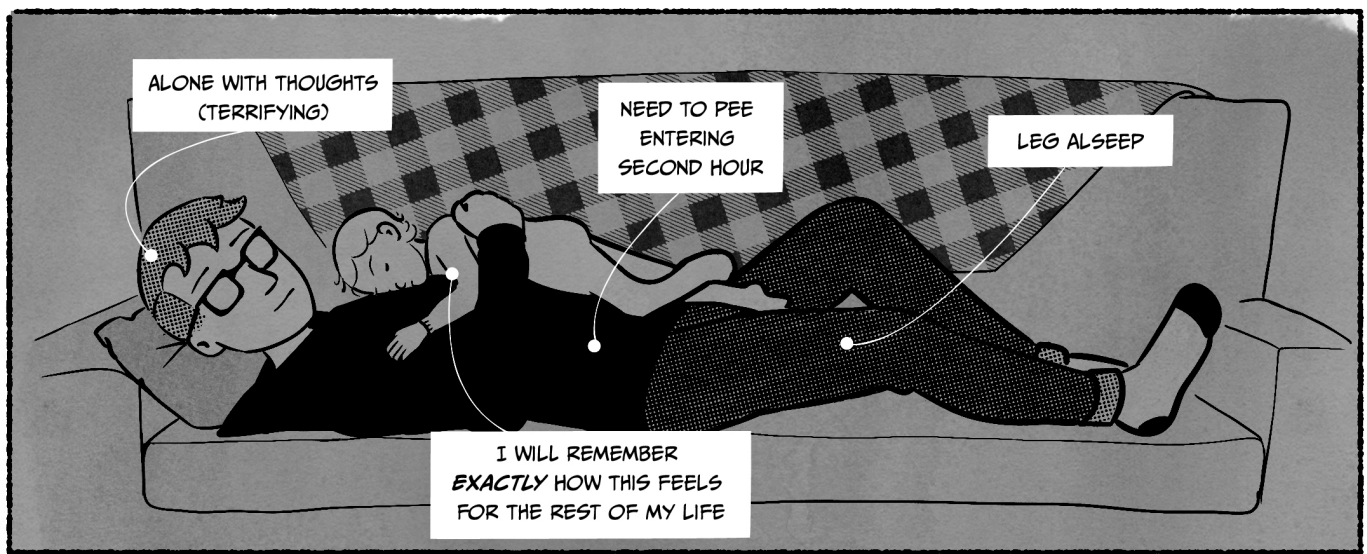
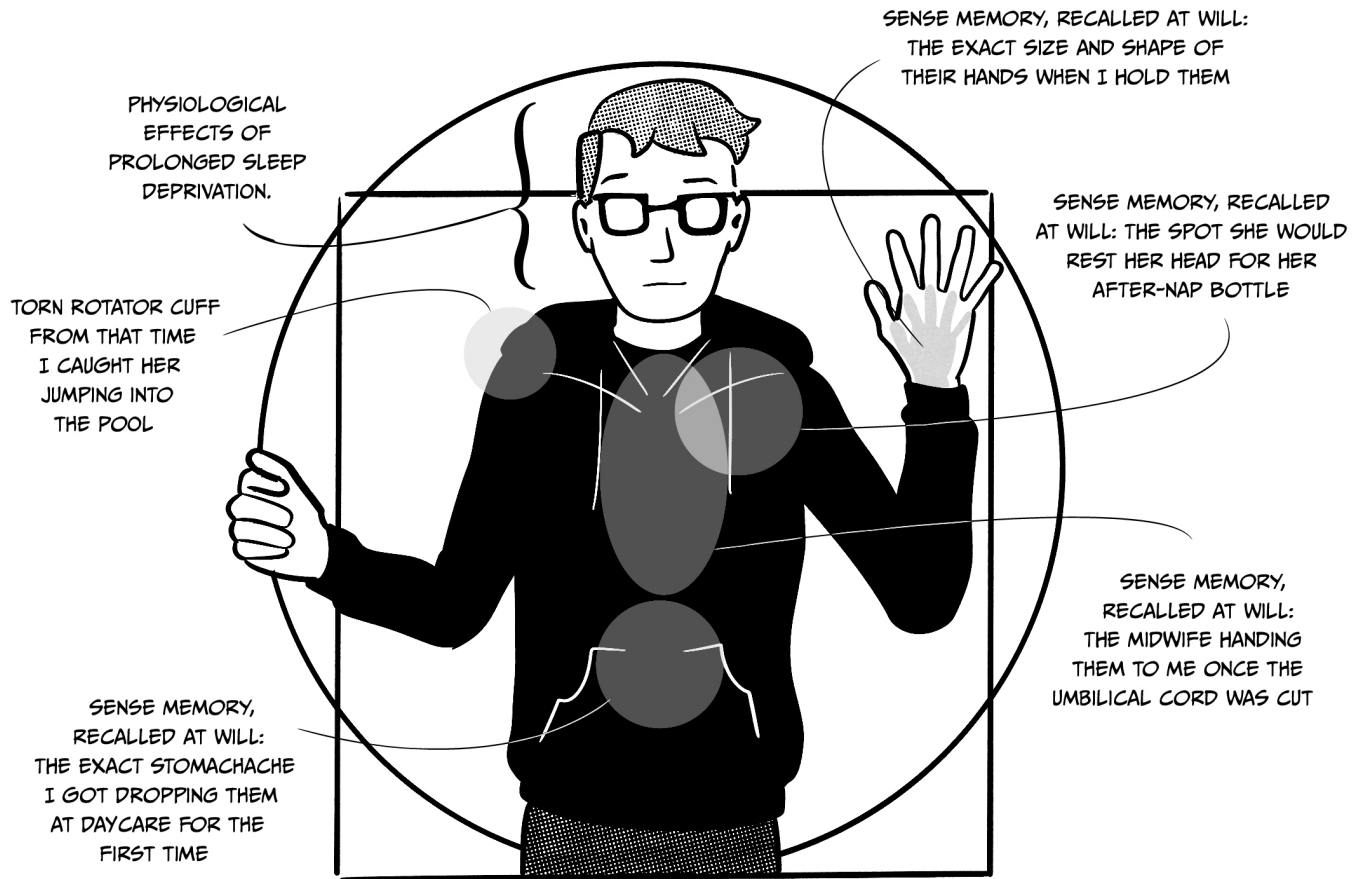


Figure 52. Do I Have An Embodied Connection To My Children?

"WE LEARN, OFTEN THROUGH PAINFUL SELF-DISCIPLINE AND SELF-CAUTERIZATION, THOSE QUALITIES WHICH ARE SUPPOSED TO BE "INNATE" IN US: PATIENCE, SELF-SACRIFICE, THE WILLINGNESS TO REPEAT ENDLESSLY THE SMALL, ROUTINE CHORES OF SOCIALIZING A HUMAN BEING."⁹⁸

- ADRIENNE RICH

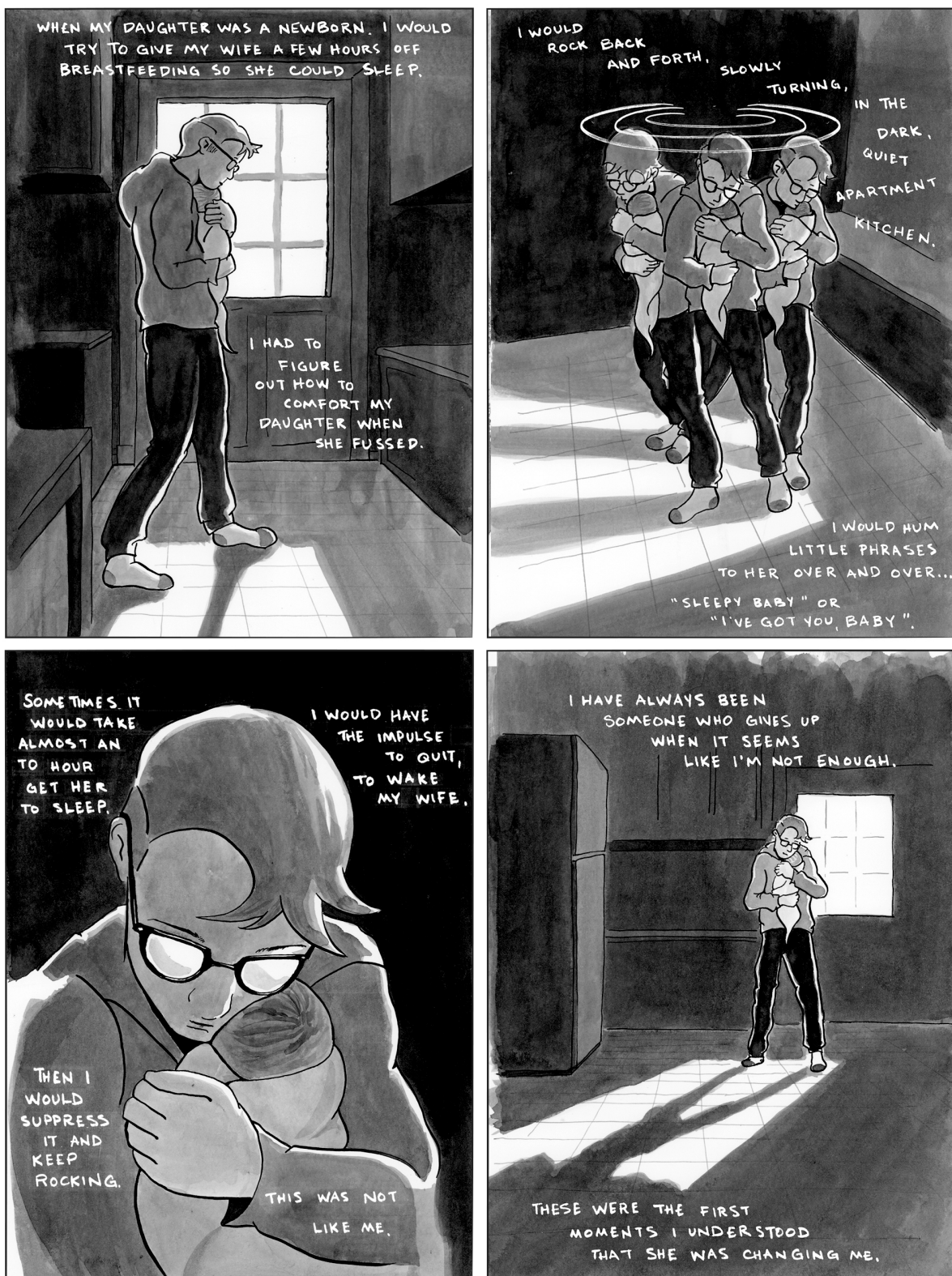


Figure 53. "The Kitchen", by Amy Noseworthy

⁹⁸ Rich, *Of Woman Born*, 34.



HI! IT LOOKS LIKE SOMETHING'S
GOING TO CHANGE! FINALLY!

In the spring of 2016, while her Attorney General was busy in court fighting queer families' demands that Cy and Ruby's act be passed, Ontario Premier Kathleen Wynne announced her intention to develop reforms to the Vital Statistics act "by the end of the year".⁹⁹ Facing both the charter challenge and a campaign of public pressure, her only explanation as to why the Liberal government needed to develop their own legislation, rather than simply going ahead and passing DiNovo's private members bill, was that Cy and Ruby's act "needed to be reworked" and asked that we "let the legislative process run its course"¹⁰⁰ – a move which added another year to the decade of waiting for promised reform that same-sex parents had already endured.

The *All Families Are Equal Act* came into force in Ontario on January 1st, 2017. The act implemented a fundamental shift in the law's conception of parenthood as derived by *intention*, rather than biology. This meant that simply providing reproductive material to a child's conception was no longer sufficient to constitute parenthood and that up to four parties could enter into a pre-conception agreement and all be named parents from birth, thereby providing protection for queer families, as well as surrogates, sperm donors, and parents who conceived using various reproductive technologies.¹⁰¹

My wife gave birth to our second daughter in November of 2017. Prior to the *All Families Are Equal Act*, parents like me – parents who held their partner's hand while they gave birth, and held their newborns as they took their first breaths; who could pick their baby's cry out in a room full of crying babies, change a diaper in ten seconds flat, and easily pass an hour staring at their infant as they slept – were considered legal strangers to their children unless and until they petitioned the province for recognition. Unexplained delays aside, Premier Wynne's government did, eventually, acknowledge what queer families were asking them to recognise – that "Ontario children are vulnerable when their parents lack legal status. Ontario families are vulnerable when they struggle with an unjust and unequal legal burden. And in Ontario, it [remained] true that some parents are more equal than others."¹⁰²

This time there was no sixty-day waiting period, no need for the donor to sign away his parental rights, no lawyers, no need for me to endure the expensive and humiliating process of adopting my own baby. My name went right alongside my wife's on my daughter's birth certificate. I took them home early in the morning on the first day of my daughter's life and got down to the messy business of parenting, free from the fear and vulnerability of an uncertain legal status.



Figure 54. My go-to infant parenting technique -
zipping the baby inside my hoodie.

⁹⁹ "Ontario Legislation Will Grant Equal Rights to Same-Sex Parents."

¹⁰⁰ "Ontario Legislation Will Grant Equal Rights to Same-Sex Parents."

¹⁰¹ vfrias, "All Families Are Equal."

¹⁰² MacLachLan and Noseworthy, "By Ignoring Parental Rights, Ontario Puts Our Daughter's Welfare at Risk."

CHURCH BASEMENT, 2018

PEOPLE ALWAYS CHAT
WITH YOU WHEN YOU
HAVE A BABY.

I USUALLY REALLY LIKED IT.
I LOVED TALKING ABOUT HOW
EXCEPTIONALLY CUTE AND
INTERESTING MY BABIES WERE.

ONCE AT AN EVENT, WHILE
MY WIFE PLAYED WITH OUR
OLDEST, I WAS OCCUPIED WITH
MY FAVOURITE JOB - SITTING
OFF TO THE SIDE, HOLDING MY
SLEEPING BABY.

AN OLDER LADY SAT
DOWN TO CHAT.
I THOUGHT SHE WAS
FRIENDS WITH MY WIFE,
BUT I OVERESTIMATED
HOW WELL ACQUAINTED
THEY WERE.

WE TALKED ABOUT
THE KIDS AT
LENGTH. SHE WAS
SWEET AND CLEARLY
ADORED THEM.

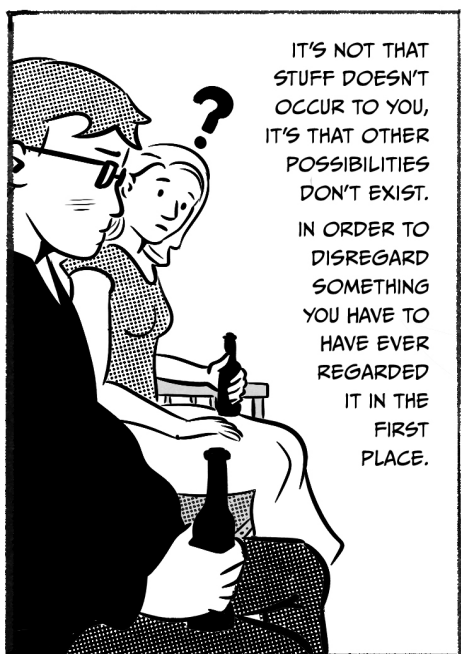
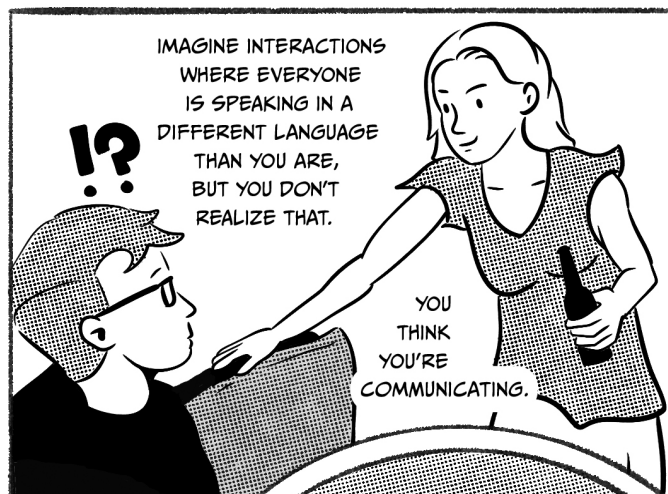
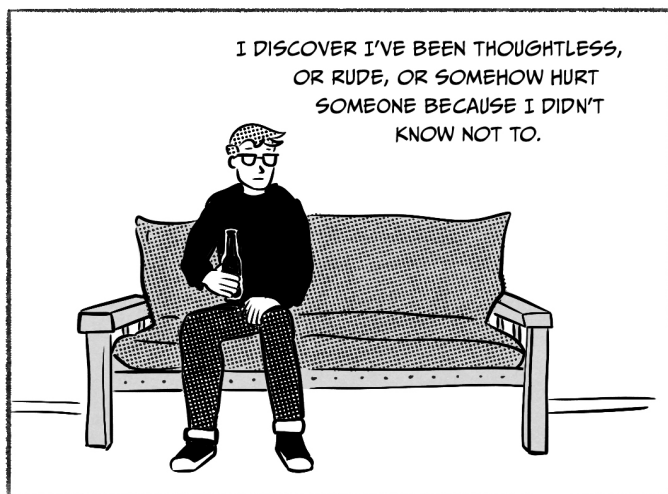
AFTER ABOUT
TEN MINUTES SHE
ASKED...

I WAS IMMEDIATELY LOST FOR
WORDS - I DIDN'T HAVE A SCRIPT,
I WASN'T PREPARED.
I HAD MISREAD THE SITUATION.

I COULDN'T CONJURE UP A STRAIGHTFORWARD
ANSWER LIKE "I'M HER MOTHER" SO I MUMBLED
SOMETHING ABOUT BEING MARRIED TO MY WIFE
AND HOW THAT MADE ME THEIR MOTHER TOO, WHICH
WAS TECHNICALLY TRUE BUT SO INADEQUATE AND
LOADED WITH SO MUCH PAINFUL IMPLICATION...

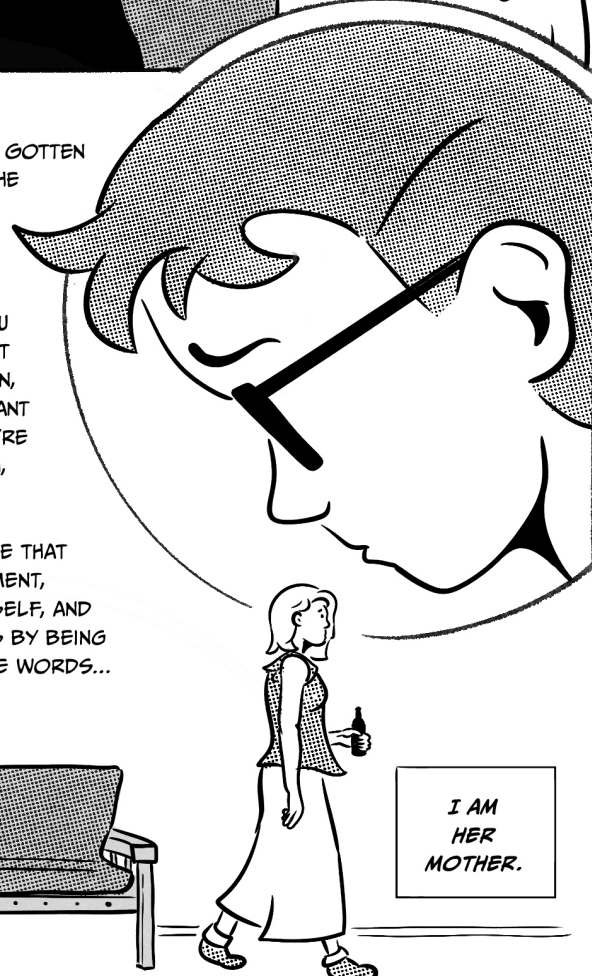
SHE FELT BAD,
SHE WAS EMBARRASSED,
I WAS EMBARRASSED,
I FELT BAD...

SHE WAS A
SWEET LADY
WHO JUST
LOVED MY
BABY AND
THIS FELT
TERRIBLE.



YOU WOULD THINK I'D HAVE GOTTEN USED TO IT BY NOW, BUT THE SIDE EFFECT OF LIVING IN A PERMANENT, DISPLACED NOW* LIKE AN OVERGROWN GOLDFISH IS THAT THE SHOCK IS ALWAYS NEW. YOU ARE NOT WHO YOU THOUGHT YOU WERE - A NICE PERSON, A GOOD LISTENER, IMPORTANT TO SOMEONE. INSTEAD YOU'RE A JERK. IT HITS WITH FRESH, FULL FORCE EVERY TIME.

IT LEADS TO MOMENTS LIKE THAT ONE IN THE CHURCH BASEMENT, WHERE YOU BETRAY YOURSELF, AND YOUR WIFE, AND YOUR KIDS BY BEING UNABLE TO SIMPLY SAY THE WORDS...



* Some autistic people experience what is informally called "time blindness" as a kind of "time spiralling", which detaches events from temporal linearity in our perception. Which means that when we experience a strong emotion we also viscerally re-experience every other time we have felt this emotion, and experience this emotion as though it's always been happening. This is one of the greatest challenges to emotional regulation commonly faced by autistic people.



Figure 55. "How Are You Related?", a comic by Amy Noseworthy

WHY WE TELL STORIES

by LISEL MUELLER

for LINDA FOSTER

1.

BECAUSE WE USED TO HAVE LEAVES
AND ON DAMP DAYS
OUR MUSCLES FEEL A TUG,
PAINFUL NOW, FROM WHEN ROOTS
PULLED US INTO THE GROUND

AND BECAUSE OUR CHILDREN BELIEVE
THEY CAN FLY, AN INSTINCT RETAINED
FROM WHEN THE BONES IN OUR ARMS
WERE SHAPED LIKE ZITHERS AND BROKE
NEATLY UNDER THEIR FEATHERS

AND BECAUSE BEFORE WE HAD LUNGS
WE KNEW HOW FAR IT WAS TO THE BOTTOM
AS WE FLOATED OPEN-EYED
LIKE PAINTED SCARVES THROUGH THE SCENERY
OF DREAMS, AND BECAUSE WE AWAKENED

AND LEARNED TO SPEAK.

2.

WE SAT BY FIRE IN OUR CAVES,
AND BECAUSE WE WERE POOR, WE MADE UP A TALE
ABOUT A TREASURE MOUNTAIN
THAT WOULD OPEN ONLY FOR US

AND BECAUSE WE WERE ALWAYS DEFEATED,
WE INVENTED IMPOSSIBLE RIDDLES
ONLY WE COULD SOLVE,
MONSTERS ONLY WE COULD KILL,
WOMEN WHO COULD LOVE NO ONE ELSE
AND BECAUSE WE HAD SURVIVED
SISTERS AND BROTHERS, DAUGHTER'S AND SONS,
WE DISCOVERED BONES THAT ROSE
FROM THE DARK EARTH AND SANG
AS WHITE BIRDS IN THE TREES

3.

BECAUSE THE STORY OF OUR LIFE
BECOMES OUR LIFE

BECAUSE EACH TELLS US
THE SAME STORY
BUT TELLS IT DIFFERENTLY

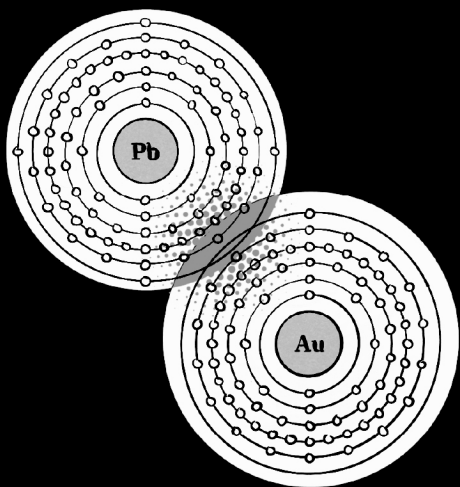
AND NONE OF US TELLS IT
THE SAME WAY TWICE

BECAUSE GRANDMOTHERS LOOKING LIKE SPIDERS
WANT TO ENCHANT THE CHILDREN
AND GRANDFATHERS NEED TO CONVINCE US
WHAT HAPPENED HAPPENED BECAUSE OF THEM

AND THOUGH WE LISTEN ONLY

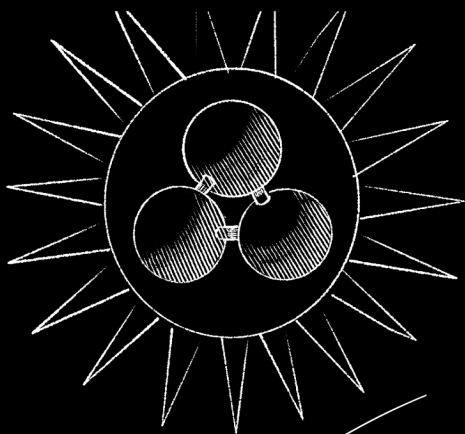
HAPHAZARDLY, WITH ONE EAR,
WE WILL BEGIN OUR STORY
WITH THE WORD AND

Figure 56. "Why We Tell Stories" by Lisel Mueller. Reprinted with permission from Louisiana State University Press.

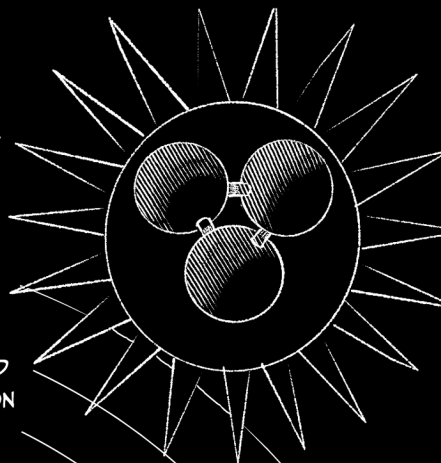


Change, Part Four: Transmutation

THE IDEA THAT ONE COULD ATTAIN TOTAL FREEDOM FROM THE LIMITATIONS OF THE BODY HAS BEEN THE MAN-BEHIND-THE-CURTAIN ACROSS ALL OF HUMAN HISTORY. UNDERSCORING EVERYTHING FROM THE OCCULT PURSUITS OF THE ALCHEMISTS, THE ROSICRUCIANS AND THE ESOTERICISTS, TO RELIGIONS LIKE CHRISTIANITY, TO MODERN DAY TECHNO-FUTURISTS, PEOPLE ARE ENDLESSLY GRIPPED BY THE DESIRE TO TRANSFORM OURSELVES COMPLETELY IN PURSUIT OF KNOWLEDGE, LONGEVITY, AND EVEN IMMORTALITY.

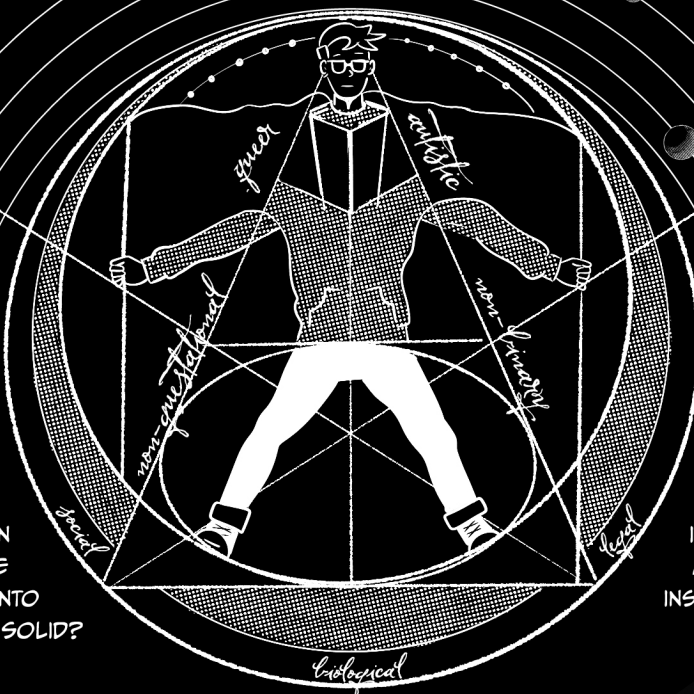


IN PHYSICS, TRANSMUTATION REFERS TO CHANGE ON AN *ATOMIC LEVEL*, AND REQUIRES EITHER A NUCLEAR REACTION OR PLODDINGLY-SLOW RADIOACTIVE DECAY. IT IS A COMPLETE CHANGE OF THE *NATURE* OF A THING - NOT SIMPLY A TRANSFORMATION FROM ONE VERSION OF A THING TO ANOTHER. A COMPLETE REMAKING, WHERE NOTHING OF THE ORIGINAL REMAINS.



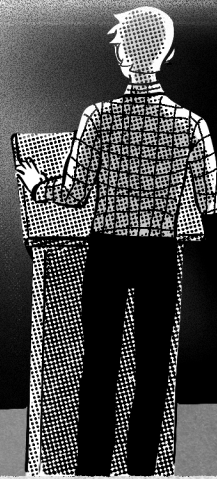
THE PHILOSOPHICALLY-MINDED HAVE SPILLED GALLONS OF INK CONSIDERING THE QUESTION OF WHERE THE *SELF* RESIDES.

ARE WE A SPIRIT, TUNING INTO A MEAT-SUIT'S ANTENNAE SOMEHOW TO DRIVE IT AROUND FOR A HANDFUL OF DECADES UNTIL WE RETURN TO SOME VAST SEA OF COLLECTIVE CONSCIOUSNESS? ARE WE AN ELECTRICAL QUIRK OF THE EVOLVED BRAIN, TRICKED INTO THINKING WE'RE SOMETHING SOLID?



CAN WE BE CREATED ON FRANKENSTEIN'S TABLE OUT OF A COLLECTION OF SPARE PARTS AND A HAPPENSTANCE OF GALVANIZING LIGHTENING? OR ARE WE CAREFULLY, INDIVIDUALLY CREATED BY AN ALL-KNOWING, ENDLESSLY INSCRUTABLE DEITY WHO WILL SOMEDAY WELCOME US TO PARADISE?

HUMANKIND HAS ALWAYS BARGAINED WITH,
FANTASIZED BEYOND, AND FOUGHT AGAINST
THE IDEA THAT OUR STATE OF BEING IS FIXED.
THAT OUR POSSIBILITIES ARE *LIMITED*.
AND STILL, BY AND LARGE, MARCH FROM ONE
END OF LIFE TO THE OTHER RESPONDING TO
OUR CONDITIONS AS ALL ORGANISMS DO -
ADAPTING TO THE BEST OF OUR ABILITY.



UNLIKE OUR COUNTERPARTS IN THE ANIMAL KINGDOM,
WE ARE THE ONLY SPECIES WHO CAN *IMAGINE* A LIFE THAT
IS RADICALLY DIFFERENT FROM THE ONE WE HAVE.
WE HAVE ALSO DEVELOPED EXCEPTIONAL SKILL AT *COMPLAINING*,
EXPERIENCING EXISTENTIAL *DISCONTENT*, AND OB DURATELY *DEFYING*
OUR LOT IN LIFE, EVEN AT THE COST OF OUR OWN MENTAL PEACE.

GIVEN ALL THAT, I'M LEFT WITH
ONE INTRACTABLE QUESTION:

CAN WE *REALLY* CHANGE?

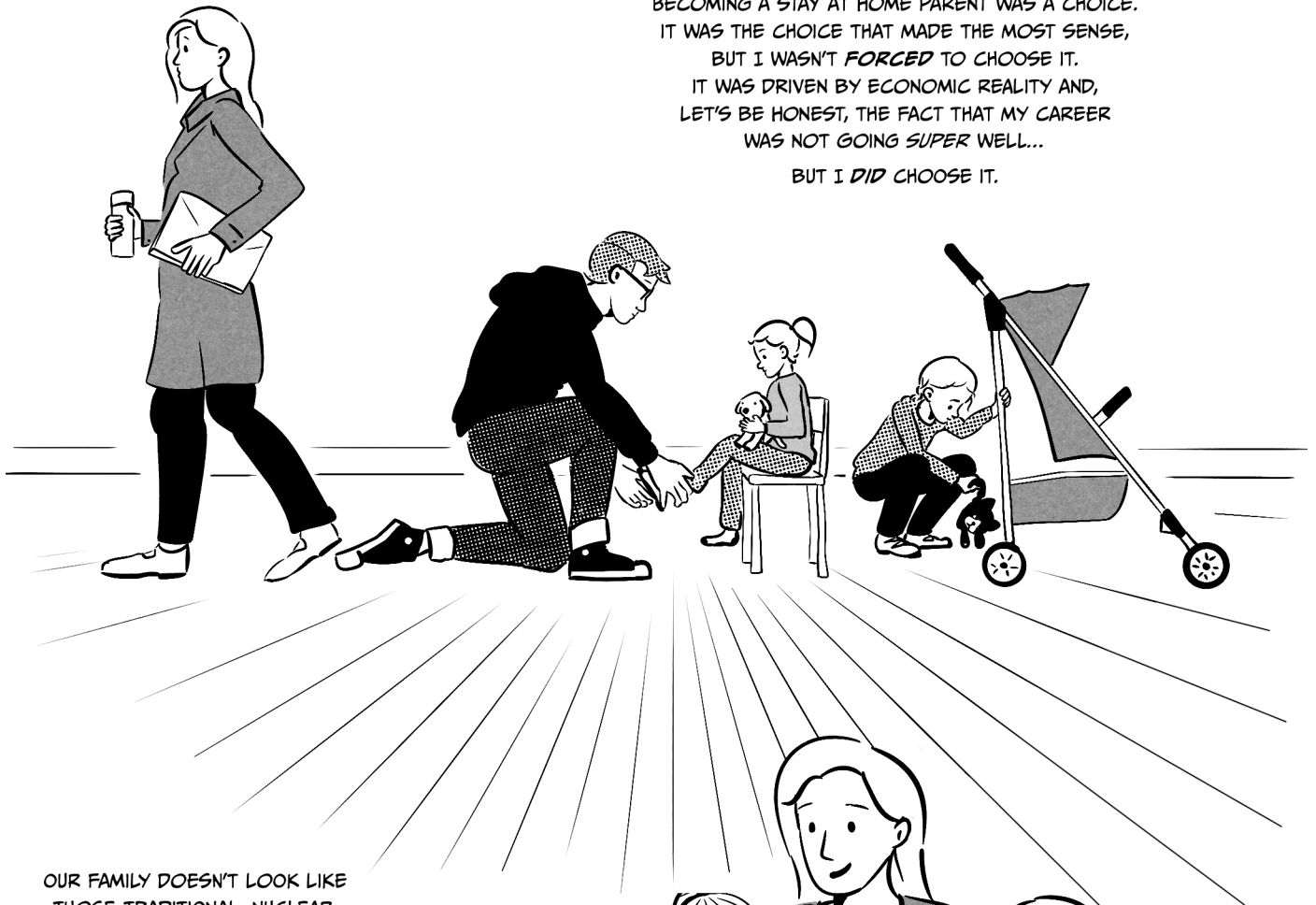


Figure 57. "Change, Part Four: Transmutation", by Amy Noseworthy

PART THREE: COULD THE ANSWER BE *CARTOONS!?*

I HAVE BEEN VERY
LUCKY IN LOVE....

BECOMING A STAY AT HOME PARENT WAS A CHOICE.
IT WAS THE CHOICE THAT MADE THE MOST SENSE,
BUT I WASN'T *FORCED* TO CHOOSE IT.
IT WAS DRIVEN BY ECONOMIC REALITY AND,
LET'S BE HONEST, THE FACT THAT MY CAREER
WAS NOT GOING *SUPER* WELL...
BUT I *DID* CHOOSE IT.



OUR FAMILY DOESN'T LOOK LIKE
THOSE TRADITIONAL, NUCLEAR,
COMIC STRIP FAMILIES
I GREW UP WITH.

WITHIN THE WALLS OF OUR HOME
THERE'S NO "VALORIZED
DOMESTICATED FEMININITY".
WE BOTH JUST GIVE WHAT WE
HAVE TO GIVE, AND KEEP GIVING
UNTIL THE KIDS' NEEDS ARE MET.
MY WIFE WOULD DO ANYTHING
TO MAKE ME HAPPY, AND IS
KIND OF JUST GENERALLY A
SUPERHERO, BUT EVEN THAT
COULDN'T PROTECT US FROM THE
EXTERNAL, MOSTLY ECONOMIC,
REALITY - WE STILL LIVE IN THE
KINGDOM OF FATHERS.



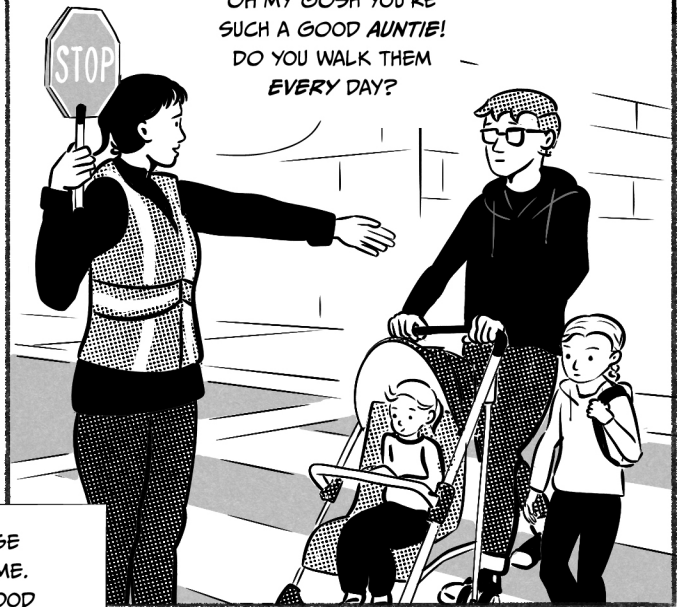
DURING THE YEARS I SPENT AT HOME WITH PRESCHOOLERS - FROM THE BIRTH OF MY DAUGHTER IN 2013 UNTIL THE END OF THE LOCKDOWNS IN 2022 - THERE WAS NO ESCAPING THE *TENSIONS*, THE WEIRD REACTIONS, THE *AWKWARDNESS*, THE *SUPER* PERSONAL QUESTIONS.

SORRY... THIS IS *SUPER* FORWARD BUT... ARE YOU TAKING ANY *MORE* BABYSITTING CLIENTS?

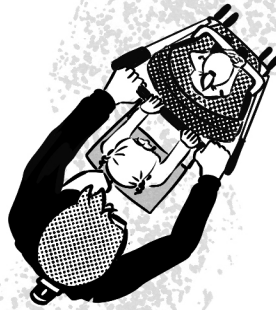


I WAS OBSESSED WITH FEELING DIFFERENT, EVERYONE ELSE WAS OBSESSED WITH FIGURING OUT HOW TO CATEGORIZE ME. I WAS TRYING TO FIGURE OUT HOW SURVIVE EARLY PARENTHOOD FROM BENEATH THE CONSTANT SHADOW OF THE QUESTION:

OH MY GOSH YOU'RE SUCH A GOOD *AUNTIE*! DO YOU WALK THEM *EVERY* DAY?



IN WHAT WAY IS MY SELFHOOD BEING SHAPED BY THE *OVERARCHING CULTURAL NORM* OF THE "*GOOD MOTHER*", AND WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR ME AS A QUEER, NON-BINARY, NON-GESTATIONAL, AUTISTIC, PRIMARY CAREGIVER TO TWO CHILDREN?



WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR OTHER *NON-NORMATIVE* PARENTS?

AND, IF NEITHER SOCIAL, BIOLOGICAL, NOR LEGAL MARKERS OF MOTHERHOOD ARE AVAILABLE, WHAT CAN I MAKE *MOTHERHOOD* OUT OF?

THE WORLD WASN'T GOING TO *GIVE* THIS TO ME. I WAS GOING TO HAVE TO *MAKE* IT MYSELF. AS USUAL, I TOOK A *CONVOLUTED* PATH, CONFOUNDED BY STUBBORNNESS, RESISTANCE TO CHANGE, *STUNNINGLY* INCOMPLETE SELF-KNOWLEDGE AND A CONSTITUTIONAL INABILITY TO PICTURE THINGS TURNING OUT OKAY.

IRONICALLY, THE LOCKDOWN IN 2020 SHOWED US THAT MY WIFE, OUR FAMILY'S BREADWINNER, WOULD HAVE *LOVED* HAVING THE TIME TO BE AT HOME, DOING ENRICHING ACTIVITIES WITH THE KIDS AND BAKING BREAD ALL DAY.

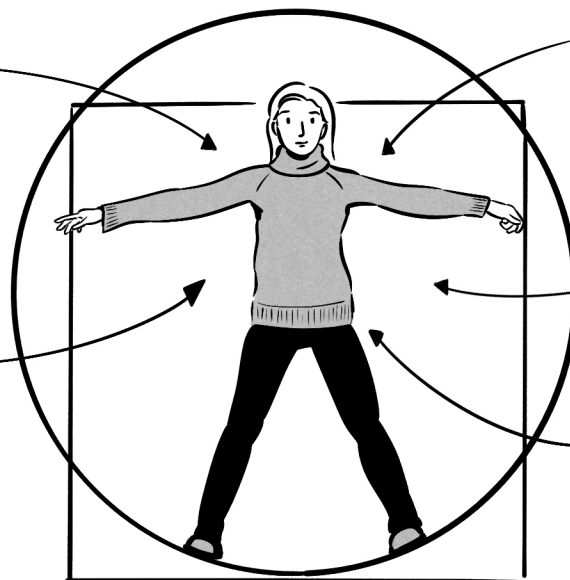


I, ON THE OTHER HAND, REACTED LIKE A *CAGED ANIMAL*, HAD SEVERAL MENTAL BREAKDOWNS, AND EMERGED HAVING DECIDED TO BECOME, OF ALL THINGS, A *CARTOONIST*.

MY WIFE MAKES *SENSE* AS A MOTHER. SHE'S REALLY *GOOD* AT IT, AND IT'S NOT THAT I'M NOT, IT'S JUST THAT NO ONE'S *SURPRISED* WHEN SHE IS.

GENDER IS STRAIGHTFORWARD.


FITS CAREGIVING DUTIES TO THE KIDS, AND THE COMMUNITY THROUGH VOLUNTEERING IN AROUND A FULL TIME, VERY DEMANDING JOB. A.K.A. *HAVING IT ALL!*



BAFFLINGLY GOOD AT MANAGING THE LABOUR, EMOTIONAL, PHYSICAL AND PRACTICAL, OF RUNNING A HOUSEHOLD.

SOCIAL AND LEGAL RECOGNITION AS THEIR MOTHER IS PRESUMED.

CARRIED, GAVE BIRTH TO, AND LOOKS A *LOT* LIKE BOTH KIDS.



JO-ANN ARCHIBALD SAYS
ONE OF THE AIMS OF
STORYWORK IS TO WORK
TOWARDS THE **BEST**
EXPRESSION OF THE SELF,
IN ORDER TO SHARE THAT BEST
SELF WITH **OTHERS**.

KENDALL WALTON
SAYS WHEN YOU ENGAGE
WITH AN IMAGE, YOUR
BRAIN **CREATES** A
STORY THAT THE
IMAGE IS **REAL**.

RICHARD WAGAMESE AND
HOWARD JOHNSON SAY
EVERYTHING IS A STORY.
REALITY IS THE PLACES OUR
STORIES **OVERLAP**.

HILARY CHUTE SAYS
THE ACT OF DRAWING
BRINGS YOUR BODY,
MEMORIES, AND STORIES
INTO CONTACT WITH
MATERIAL REALITY, AND
LYNDA BARRY SAYS AN
IMAGINED THING IS STILL
A THING THAT'S
HAPPENED.

THE **LAW** MAY
NOT HAVE SEEN ME
AS A MOTHER.

BIOLOGY
MAY NOT SEE ME
AS A MOTHER.

THE BYSTANDER,
THE CROSSING GUARD,
THE OTHER MOMS ON
THE PLAYGROUND, THE
NURSES AT THE CLINIC
MAY NOT SEE ME
AS A MOTHER.

BUT I DO NOT
OWE THEM MY
DOUBT.

I OWE MY
FAMILY
MY BEST.

I'M TRYING TO CREATE A STORY
THAT HOLDS MY EXPERIENCE OF MOTHERHOOD,
IN ORDER TO MAKE IT REAL.

SO MAYBE THEN, I NEED TO THINK *LESS* ABOUT WHAT MAKES ME A PERSON -
HOW TO CONSTITUTE MOTHERHOOD BY *IMITATION* OR *EXTERNAL* ENDOWMENT -
AND MORE ABOUT WHAT MAKES THIS A *LIFE*.

The year she was born

The year we bought the house,
the first time she called me "Mama"

The year she spent trying to get pregnant
(the year we didn't know what would happen)

The year she was born

The year I took my first comic class

The year we cancelled plans for our first
weekend away without them,
the year she mastered sour dough.

The year we replaced our furnace, and
turned the box into a *MAGNIFICENT* fort.

WE PLANTED A TREE THE YEAR WE
BECAME *MOTHERS*, AND ANOTHER THE
YEAR OUR FAMILY BECAME *COMPLETE*.
OUR STORY TAKES PLACE OVER YEARS,
NOT IN A *SCATTERED* COLLECTION OF
LOUDLY *UNCOMFORTABLE* MOMENTS.

The year she learned to swim

The year she learned she couldn't automatically
swim (then learned to swim).

The year we discovered that really
cool beach out by our cousins' place

The year we raised butterflies,
The year her best friend moved away.

The first time she called me "Bro"

The year we were watching Ghost Spider
hoodies to the movie theatre

I WANT TO BE INTENTIONAL ABOUT HOW I REMEMBER THIS TIME.
I OFTEN WONDER WHAT THEY'RE GOING TO REMEMBER.
HOW WILL THEY REMEMBER ME? THIS HOUSE? THESE YEARS?

MOTHERHOOD HAS *CHANGED* ME.
THEY'VE *CHANGED* ME.

BUT IF THEY'RE *OKAY*
THEN I'M OKAY WITH WHAT
THEY'VE *CHANGED* ME IN TO.

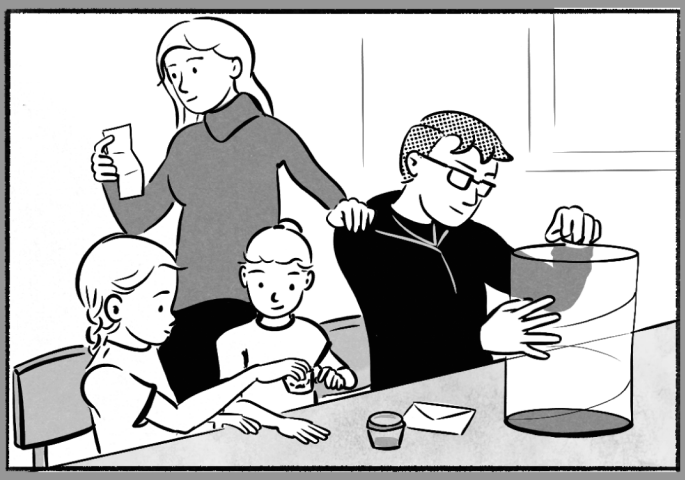
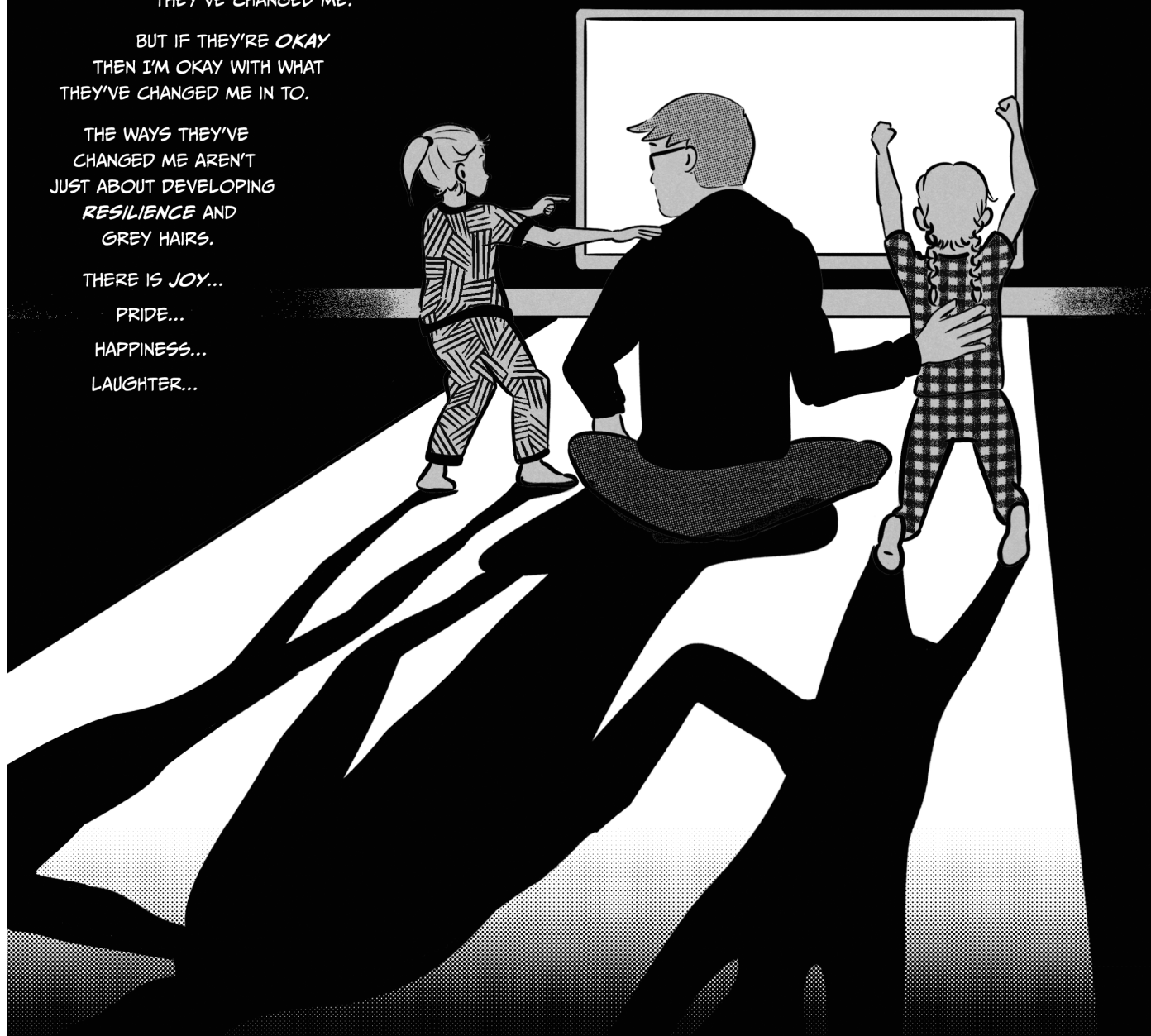
THE WAYS THEY'VE
CHANGED ME AREN'T
JUST ABOUT DEVELOPING
RESILIENCE AND
GREY HAIRS.

THERE IS *JOY*...

PRIDE...

HAPPINESS...

LAUGHTER...

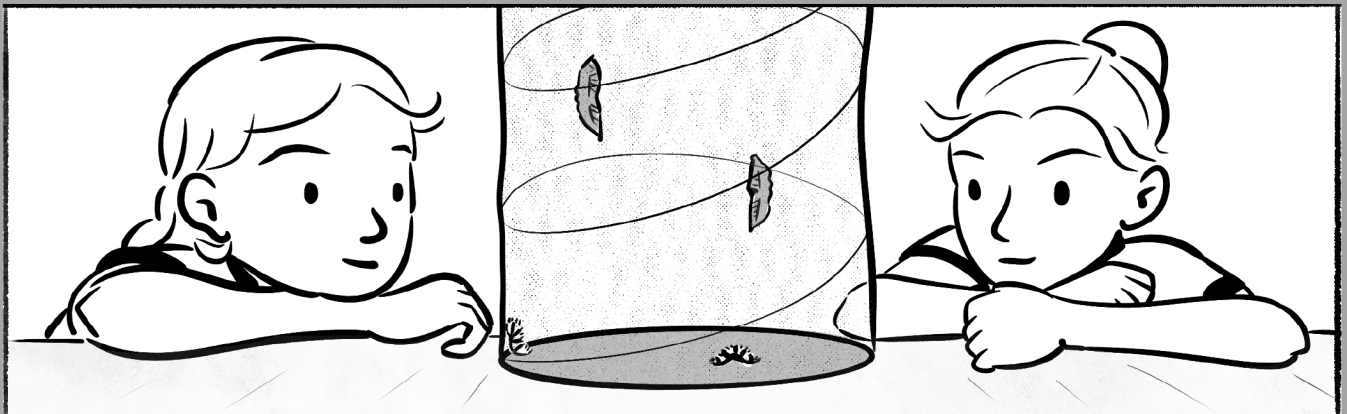


MAYBE MY IDENTITY,
MY "MOTHERHOOD",
CAN BE FOUND STRUNG BETWEEN
THIS COLLECTION OF
TENDER MOMENTS, AND
THE TASK BEFORE ME
IS TO CURATE
THEM WITH *CARE*.

MOTHERHOOD HELD TENDERLY
IN THE VIVID MEMORY
OF THEIR LITTLE HEADS
ON MY CHEST...

THEIR LITTLE
HANDS REACHING
UP TO ME...

OF HER
LAUGHING AT ONE
OF MY JOKES.



THE PLACE WHERE I BUILD
MOTHERHOOD IS NOT LEGAL,
OR BIOLOGICAL, OR SOCIAL.

IT'S THE THING I *SHOW UP*
TO DO EVERY DAY.

I MAY NEVER HAVE THE
WORDS TO FULLY DESCRIBE IT,
BUT I *KNOW* IT.



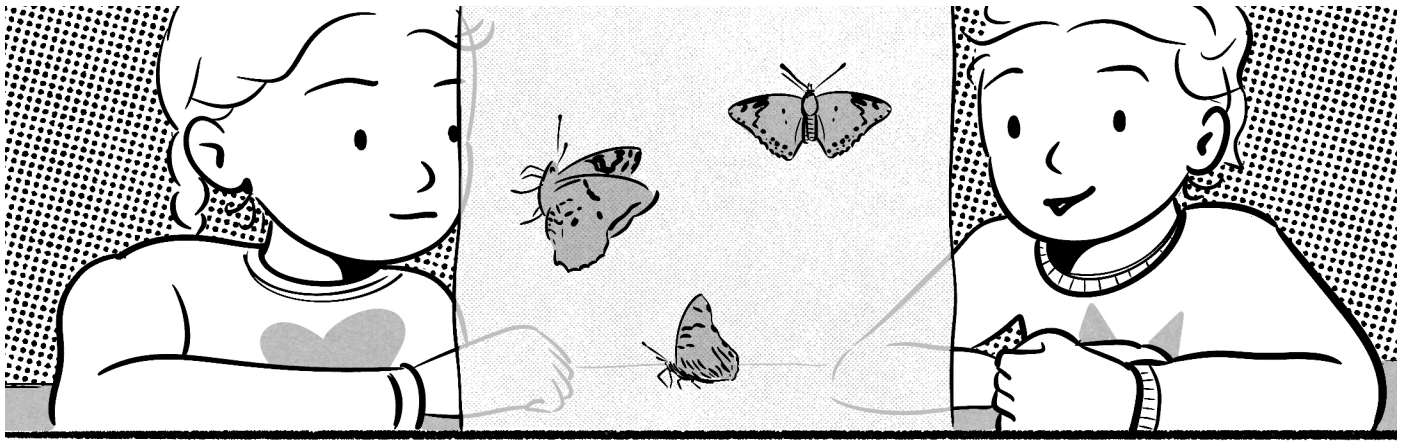
AS EBER HAMPTON
REMINDS US -
WE *KNOW* SO MUCH MORE
THAN WE CAN SAY.



AND AS LYNDA BARRY DIRECTS US -
A *THOUGHT* AND *SOMETHING*
HAPPENING TO US ARE NOT ENTIRELY
DIFFERENT THINGS, AND AN IMAGE CAN BE
"THE PULL-TOY THAT PULLS YOU...
FROM ONE PLACE TO ANOTHER".

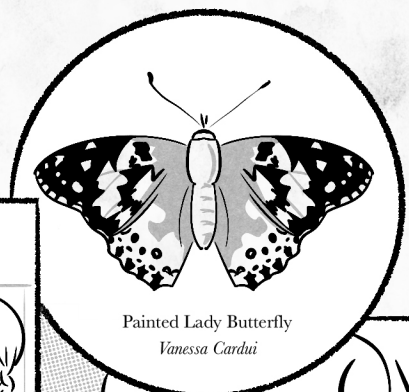
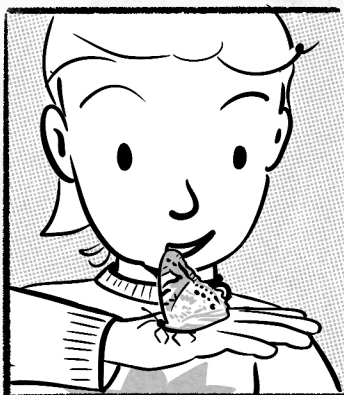


¹⁰³ Barry, *What It Is*, 121.



WHICH LEAVES
ME WITH ONE
INEVITABLE,
UNAVOIDABLE
ANSWER TO MY
MAIN RESEARCH
QUESTION:

YES.
IF NONE OF
THE MARKERS OF THE
CULTURAL NORM OF THE
MOTHER ARE AVAILABLE
TO ME, THE ANSWER
COULD, IN FACT,
BE CARTOONS.



Painted Lady Butterfly
Vanessa Cardui

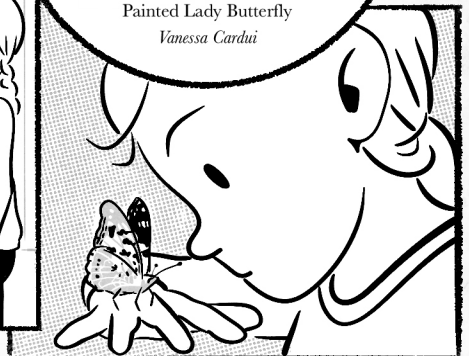




Figure 58. "In Conclusion", a comic by Amy Noseworthy

Dear mom,

some people think ur
not my REAL mom.
When they tell me this
I say: Ur right, she
isn't my REAL mom!
She is my REAL MAMA!!
So.....



Figure 60. Early character designs, contributed by my youngest. Note the appearance of my signature asymmetrical hair swoop.

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