

Visualising the Psyche:
Perspectives on mental health in the medium of comics

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Abstract

The field of Psychology is constantly shifting in its understanding of mental health. Scholars have been critiquing Psychology's narrow perspective of what constitutes 'normal'. Many dealing with mental health issues fear that they will be misunderstood and are confronted with systems and institutions that they find unempathetic. This mini-thesis conceptualises creative empathy as a solution to these problems. It is based on the idea that every experience is unique and therefore cannot be wholly understood without engaging in an imaginative process. The appropriateness of the comics medium as a tool for promoting this strategy is explored with a focus on the use of visual imagery to tell stories of distressing experiences. It looks at Tayla Shan Solomon's *The Adventures of Apparently-Anyone-Can-Do-It-If-They-Just-Try Bug!* (2019), Art Spiegelman's *Maus (I & II)* (1986), Joe Kelly and JM Ken Niimura's *I Kill Giants* (2011), and Allie Brosh's *Hyperbole and a Half: unfortunate situations, flawed coping mechanisms, mayhem, and other things that happened* (2013). This mini-thesis analyses various techniques employed by comics artists to create compelling stories of idiosyncratic experiences, including the use of symbolic imagery and framing.

Declaration of originality

I declare that this thesis is my own work and that all the sources I have used have been acknowledged by complete references. This thesis is being submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirement for Master of Fine Arts at Rhodes University. I declare that it has not been submitted before for any degree or examination at another university.

Signed: _____

Date: 19 November 2019

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Introduction

“To me, I write about living and the art of living. My villain is Life itself. Human beings are struggling to survive.”

(Will Eisner in Duncan, Smith, & Levitz, 2009:34)

Comics, as an artistic medium, is outlined by Scott McCloud¹ (1993:20) as “juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response in the viewer”. It is an art form that includes comic books, comic strips, webcomics and graphic novels (McCloud, 1993). In this mini-thesis I aim to explore how the medium of comics may be an apt tool for promoting a range of perspectives on mental health. There is a growing recognition of the power of comics as an art form – for example, Art Spiegelman’s graphic narrative *Maus* (1986) has received much academic attention over the years. The medium is believed by critics and creators to be able to “accommodate content as profound, moving, and enduring as that found in any of the more celebrated vehicles for human expression” (Duncan, Smith & Levitz, 2009:2). Comics offer a unique reading experience. The words and pictures amplify and refine each other as the reader derives meaning from them (Carleton, 2014). The reader is also required to deduce the relationship between images next to each other through a process known as closure (McCloud, 1993). Carleton (2014:165) suggests that this kind of engagement may encourage “active learning and critical engagement”.

My Master of Fine Arts submission takes the form of a graphic novel and presentation given at a book launch. The graphic novel is semi-autobiographical and explores experiences of mental distress at university. The graphic novel aims to critique the bureaucratic approach to mental health that relies on pathologizing mental health struggles. It is titled *The Adventures of Apparently-Anyone-Can-Do-It-If-They-Just-Try Bug!*² and tells the story of a Christmas beetle named Leah Onnerback. Leah attends a university to fulfil her dream of becoming a sociologist. Unfortunately, Leah’s university operates in a way that is geared towards the skillset, physicality and learning style of ants. She has great difficulty succeeding in this environment, not only because Christmas beetles are very different from ants, but because she

¹ Scott McCloud explores and defines the way in which comics communicate in a manner unique to the medium in his comprehensive book *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art* (1993). This forms the basis of my examination of mental health representation in graphic novels.

² Hereafter, this is shortened to *The Adventures of A-Bug!* (2019)

constantly finds herself stuck on her back. Her adventures include fighting with the university administration, meeting deadlines, missing lectures, attempting to make sense of all the unsolicited advice that gets thrown at her, and finally battling the mysterious, polymorphic ‘Void’. The status quo of most university systems is that learning and productivity happen in a specific and structured manner. In my experience of anxiety and depression, I have found that this is not necessarily the way that everyone functions. Through the metaphor of a beetle’s embodied struggles at an ant university, one may begin to understand these experiences.

Along with my own, three other graphic narratives are explored in this mini-thesis: Art Spiegelman’s *Maus* (1986), Joe Kelly and JM Ken Niimura’s *I Kill Giants* (2011) and Allie Brosh’s *Hyperbole and a Half: unfortunate situations, flawed coping mechanisms, mayhem, and other things that happened*³ (2013).

In contrast to the widely used description of ‘Holocaust novel’, Art Spiegelman’s *Maus* (1986) is a novel about the effects of the Holocaust on the relationship between Art Spiegelman and his father, Vladek. It portrays the interactions between the two as Vladek recounts his story of surviving the Holocaust. According to Chute (2011), comics allow different temporalities to be overlaid, existing in the same space. She proposes that this representation of the past seeping into the present is able to compellingly express experiences of trauma. In *Maus* (1986) the painful memories of the Holocaust and Art’s mother’s suicide are seen to affect the present, this being presented visually in comics form (Chute, 2011).

Joe Kelly and JM Ken Niimura’s *I Kill Giants* (2011) tells the story of a young girl named Barbara Thorson who claims to kill giants. Her struggle with and eventual acceptance of her ill mother’s approaching death is depicted as a battle with a Titan – the biggest of the giants. This metaphorical battle is what Church (2016:122) describes as “a visible expression of an invisible affliction”.

Hyperbole and Half (2013) is a collection of stories about the author’s life that originally started as blog posts. Brosh’s stories may be seen as an example of “narrative medicine” (Farthing & Priego, 2016:2) that works by providing “new insights into the personal experience of illness [or distress]” (Green & Meyers, 2010:574 in Farthing & Priego, 2016:2). Moss-Wellington (2017:56) relates Brosh’s comic to the “therapeutic benefits of humour”.

The title of my mini-thesis, *Visualising the psyche: Perspectives on mental health in the medium of comics*, highlights a key aspect of my research. Psyche, in the original Greek means soul (Weiten, 2013). It is also the prefix used in the word psychology. The word psyche

³ Hereafter, this is shortened to *Hyperbole and a Half* (2013)

has now become synonymous with the word mind (Weiten, 2013). This mini-thesis explores the representation of mental health in comics, but foregrounds perspectives that critique or offer alternative models to what Peter Kinderman (2014:xxiv) terms the “disease model”. This is in light of the growing criticism surrounding the field of Psychology and its practices. Moving away from using pathology to understand mental health concerns, John Cromby, Dave Harper and Paula Reavey (2013) use the word ‘distress’ to describe experiences commonly referred to as ‘mental illness’, ‘abnormal psychology’ or ‘madness’. They frame distress as “something that happens within the life and subjective awareness of a person” (Cromby, Harper & Reavey, 2013:4). This argument is central to the mini-thesis because it acknowledges and highlights as foundational the unique subjectivities pertinent to understanding experiences of mental distress. One’s mind, body, soul and experiences are not disconnected.

Cromby (2015) and Kinderman (2014) reconceptualise in similar ways the notion of mental distress as an experience. Cromby (2015:179) suggests that a conceptualisation of individuality as radical individuality due to its “absolute cultural-historical-biological uniqueness” is necessary in understanding mental distress. Kinderman (2014) similarly focuses on how an individual’s experience is idiosyncratic in that it is informed and influenced by their past experiences - the culmination of which belongs only to them. He goes on to suggest that by understanding how one’s subjective perception of and reaction to the world is informed by past experiences, one can better address experiences of distress. Kinderman (2014:xvi) problematises pathologizing mental distress stating that “[i]t’s unacceptable to suggest that people damaged by their experiences are in some sense inadequate, ill or constitutionally unfit”. One in four people will experience clinical levels of distress in their lives (Cromby, Harper & Reavey, 2013). This statistic normalises the idea of distress - not only is it reasonable to state that everyone experiences distress at some point, but also that it is common for this distress to be so extreme as to warrant professional help.

The comics medium may have a proclivity for narrating the “human subject who is either in extremis or facing a brutal experience” (Chute, 2011:108). The works that I have selected to discuss portray distressing experiences. In particular, they can be seen to portray psychological distress not as a pathologized abnormality, but as a reaction of the soul to experience and context. This mini-thesis engages with the qualities of the comics medium that allow it to be a particularly appropriate medium for expressing experiences of mental distress. It can be suggested that the comics medium may allow for understanding created through imagination. The imagination required to read graphic narratives may help in communicating alternative perspectives on and fostering empathetic understandings of mental distress. As

Moss-Wellington (2017:21) describes: “compassion begins from imaginatively and speculatively connecting our experience to the experience of other things”. This is similar to how the reading experience of a graphic narrative is “the result of the interaction between what is on the page and the life experience [...] of the reader” (Carleton, 2014:165). The experience fosters “an intimacy [...] between the creator and audience” (McCloud, 1993:69).

In this mini-thesis, I explore the notion of creative empathy. I base this concept around Cromby (2015) and Kinderman’s (2014) theories of mental distress as an idiosyncratic experience. One cannot possibly understand the experience of another without engaging one’s imagination as another’s experience is never the same as one’s own. For mental health struggles - threats that are invisible and are manifested through feelings - creativity is necessary in order to depict it. Since many who struggle with mental health are often faced with a lack of understanding and empathy, a culture of creative empathy may help others to react to mental distress with sensitivity and compassion. This mini-thesis explores the strategies employed by comics artists⁴ that may contribute to the promotion of creative empathy.

Chapter one looks at the role of symbolism within comics and how different forms of symbolism such as metaphor, anthropomorphism and signifiers contribute to the comprehension of experiences of distress. This chapter also explores how the use of symbolism may create the kind of distance from painful subject matter that may help the author and audience to engage with it. Perceptions of characters are made as intricate as the people they represent through the symbolic use of clothing, colour and style. Signifiers that animate the characters and portray their emotions provide ‘inside’ information regarding their psyche that would not be available in face to face interactions with people. The comics medium’s repository of visual clues allows for a complex, multi-layered perception of characters and their experiences with which the reader is able to identify.

Chapter two considers how graphic narratives may provide ways of representing and critiquing dominant frameworks of mental health. This is explored through looking at the panel border as symbolic of these frameworks. It then goes on to explore how alternative and potentially personal frameworks of distress may be portrayed in comics. I argue that narratives situate the experience within context - an important part of any situation especially in mental health where past experiences have so much effect on the present. I then explore the use of humour in telling stories of struggle and the cognitive effects of this in approaching

⁴ The creators of comics identify with a variety of titles such as authors, artists, cartoonists, illustrators or story-tellers. In this thesis, I use the terms author and artist interchangeably to refer to comics creators.

representations of mental distress. These ways of framing may encourage alternative and more empathetic perspectives on mental health.

Chapter One: Symbolism in Comics

Anderson (1992:46) describes the creation and interpretation of symbolism as “singularly human”. For myself, the use of symbolism and metaphor is an almost instinctual habit - a way of always connecting to something beyond the thing itself. During the final year of my undergraduate degree, I was working with the concept of insects to symbolise one's ability to disregard other humans thereby rendering them as insignificant as an insect. During this time, I returned home to find a Christmas beetle stuck on its back. My immediate thought was, “I know how you feel”. My experience of depression and this beetle on its back had immediate correlations. Thus, the physical struggle of a beetle became a way of expressing an experience of mental distress that was otherwise difficult to explain. As Emblar (1952:3) states: “As we know from constant experience of the inadequacy of language, our inner life is impossible of precise articulation”. Further to providing a means of expression, symbols are particularly useful when communicating perspectives on distress because “[i]n symbolic representation, we can displace discursive candour to a safer allegorical realm when dealing with sensitive interpersonal matters.” (Moss-Wellington, 2017:91). There is a certain distance created through symbolism. I may not have been able to tell my story if it were not indirectly through the character of Leah whose difficulties are not entirely the same as my own.

The comics medium is entirely made up of different forms of symbolism. According to Hosterman, (2007:11) “Symbols encompass the spoken word, the written word, and visual icons, characteristics of all types of comics and cartoons”. The symbols used in comics range from abstract signifiers such as speech bubbles or speed lines⁵ to extended metaphors (McCloud, 1993). The forms of symbolism explored in this thesis are metaphors, anthropomorphism, and symbolism that fall under the term “psychological images” (Duncan, Smith & Levitz, 2009:160). A conceptual metaphor can be understood as “[w]hen one conceptual domain is understood in terms of another conceptual domain” (Kövecses, 2002:248). Metaphors have the ability to relate a concrete, tangible idea to an abstract concept. This makes them a useful tool to provide understanding for that which may be difficult to grasp (Kövecses, 2002). In this case, it would be a personal idiosyncratic experience of distress. The use of metaphor to express distressing experiences will be explored in *The Adventures of A-Bug!* (2019) and in *I Kill Giants* (2011). They shall be studied in relation to Kövecses (2002 & 2005) exploration of metaphor and metaphor in culture and Cromby's (2015) theory of

⁵ Speed lines are thin lines used in comics to signify a fast movement (Duncan, Smith & Levitz, 2009)

experience as embodied. In the next section a particular kind of metaphor, that of anthropomorphism, which is found in *The Adventures of A-Bug!* (2019) and *Maus* (1986) will be analysed. Anthropomorphism is “the projection of human qualities on that which is not human [...]” (Anderson, 1989:50). I explore this strategy in relation to Thormann’s (2002:130) statement that “animals’ stories reveal eternal truths, and especially the truths of power relations”⁶. In the last section, the use of colour, psychological images and other smaller signifiers are explored in *The Adventures of A-Bug!* (2019), *I Kill Giants* (2011) and *Hyperbole and a Half* (2013). These strategies, while not as complex as the previous forms of symbolism, may allow artists to add nuance and depth to the story and characters within the comics.

1.1. Mind over Matter: The use of metaphor to express experiences of mental distress

Experiences of distress cannot be solely understood as ‘happening in your head’. Distressful experiences, as with all experiences, are “bound up with social and material conditions, personal biographies, life events, and relationships” (Cromby, Harper & Reavey, 2013:9). Furthermore, distressful experiences can affect, or be affected by, bodily sensations such as heartbeat, sweat or fatigue. In his book *Feeling Bodies: Embodying Psychology*, Cromby (2015:35) puts forward the notion of “embodied” experience. He does so by drawing from biomedical models of psychology as well as affect theory and various branches of sociology and philosophy. He proposes that “[f]eelings are enabled by the living body” (Cromby, 2015:61). Furthermore, feelings are the basis of experience and are only perceived and considered by the brain after they happen. Thus, feelings of distress cannot be understood separately from the body. Feelings, experience and the body must be viewed as interrelated in order to be better understood. Cromby (2015:17) uses the term the “embrained body” to describe this perspective.

Evidence of this intense relationship between mind and body can be found when looking at how human experience has shaped metaphorical language. Kövecses (2005) theorises the relationship between metaphor and culture. He studies and exemplifies kinds of metaphors and their potential origins. Many metaphors are in fact universal as they stem from bodily sensations (Kövecses, 2005). For example, referring to someone as metaphorically ‘warm’ may stem from the body heat that is felt during experiences associated with friendly

⁶ For example, George Orwell’s *Animal Farm* (1945) speaks to the domineering qualities that humans are susceptible to when in positions of power.

behaviour, such as a hug. Thus, if experiences of distress are shaped by “our nature as living, organic beings”, metaphors that so readily enable associations of physicality with abstract concepts may be appropriate for giving expression to the abstract concepts of mental distress (Cromby, Harper & Reavey, 2013:9). Moreover, they may help to create universally understood expressions of mental distress.

The first metaphor encountered in *The Adventures of A-Bug!* (2019) is that of a Christmas beetle stuck on its back (Fig 1). The experience of a Christmas beetle stuck on its back can be paralleled to an experience of depression. The beetle struggles against its own weight in trying to turn over. This blur between the obstacle and oneself can be likened to a struggle where one’s mind is simultaneously the tool for recovery and one’s own ‘worst enemy’ in trying to manage the self-destructive nature of depression. Depression can also hinder one’s ability to complete daily tasks. In a university setting, each day encompasses a long list of activities and tasks that need to be accomplished. These activities include attending lectures, attending and participating in tutorials, getting books from the library, doing the course readings and working on assignments. Trying to keep up with every task despite one’s condition can therefore be tiring. Sometimes one is not capable of completing any of them. If a beetle is stuck on its back, one can imagine that it would not be able to keep up with so many tasks. It would be tired from having to struggle to turn over after constantly falling on its back, thus making other tasks much more difficult. And when falling can happen anywhere and at any time, you could understand why Leah would be late for her ‘Misanthropology’⁷ lecture now and then.

⁷ ‘Misanthropology’ is a play on the prefix and words ‘mis’ (meaning wrong), ‘misanthropy’ (meaning hatred of humans) and ‘anthropology’ (the study of humans). It calls to mind misunderstandings between fellow humans that lead to division, systematic oppression and other practices that may be viewed as hateful.



Figure 1: Tayla Shan Solomon, panel from page 3, *The Adventures of A-Bug!* (2019)

I chose the metaphor of the insect on its back as a way to connect mental distress to the body. It highlights distress as something which can be a re-occurring issue in someone's life and which, for some people who have a tendency towards experiencing distress, can feel inescapable or unchangeable. However, for a Christmas beetle there is nothing inherently 'wrong' with getting stuck on your back – it is just part of who you are. This is a perspective that contrasts with the disease model approach to understanding distress. As Tsoku Maela, a South African photographer who tackles the subject of depression in his work, puts it: "We've been indoctrinated to run away from the dark [...] and ignore our vices like they came from out there somewhere, and are not part of our biological, genetic and spiritual make up" (Between 10 and 5, 2016).

1.1.1 Size

The choice of an insect to represent a character who struggles with distress also alludes to the sense of smallness one feels in comparison to the gravity of one's situation. A metaphor that effectively communicates the potential immensity of mental distress is a giant (Fig 2). In Kelly and Niimura's *I Kill Giants* (2011) Barbara is a young girl who claims that she kills giants. For this she is sent to the school psychologist. However, it should be noted that nowhere in the novel is she diagnosed with any kind of 'mental illness'. Critics have explored what 'illness' it may be from which she is 'suffering'. Church (2016:132-133) lists as possibilities: "Acute Stress Disorder [...] Personality Disorder [...] Obsessive Compulsive Disorder".

However, as the story goes on, the reader discovers that Barbara's mother is dying (Kelly & Niimura, 2011). Clues are also given to indicate that her father may have died too: Barbara's care-taker while her mother is sick is her older sister, Karen. In the beginning of the novel, one sees a box of baseball bats in Barbara's room and she has named her giant-slaying hammer after a baseball player. Yet, Barbara refuses to play baseball and refuses to talk about it (Kelly & Niimura, 2011). The missing father and the fact that she claims to know all about giants, allows one to speculate that perhaps Barbara has already experienced the death or disappearance of a loved one, making her hyper-aware of what is happening to her mother. For a young child, as Kinderman (2014) suggests it is possible to find in everyone's situation, her experience of distress is quite understandable. Death is a difficult experience for anyone. For Barbara, the impending death of her mother would probably feel overwhelming, that is, giant.



Figure 2: JM Ken Nimura, double page spread from *I Kill Giants* (2014)

The sense of this metaphor is conveyed through several visual and linguistic techniques. The first linguistic clue is given when Barbara describes the monstrous Titan⁸ as “something so horrible the sun will not shine upon it” (Kelly, 2011). The second clue to the nature of her experience is given when Barbara comes face to face with the Titan and has a moment of apprehension, saying, “It’s too big” (Kelly, 2011). Connors (2011) explores the visual strategies used by Niimura that put the reader in Barbara’s position, showing us what the experience looks and feels like to her. The first image of the Titan is spread across two pages (Fig 2), making it the biggest that the printed format allows. Niimura uses a “low vertical angle” (Connors, 2011:83) so that our view is through Barbara’s eyes on the ground beneath. This angle also allows the rain to create strong diagonals. These take readers deeper into the picture space, which in turn exaggerates the giant’s immense physical stature (Connors, 2011:83). Furthermore, Connors (2011:83) notes that the swirling clouds above the giant’s head create “a vertigo-like effect, adding to the sense of instability”. The titled angle of the panel, noted by the sea climbing the side of the page, also adds to this sense of instability. This technique is noted by McCloud (1993) to be often used to create intensity.

1.1.2 The Void

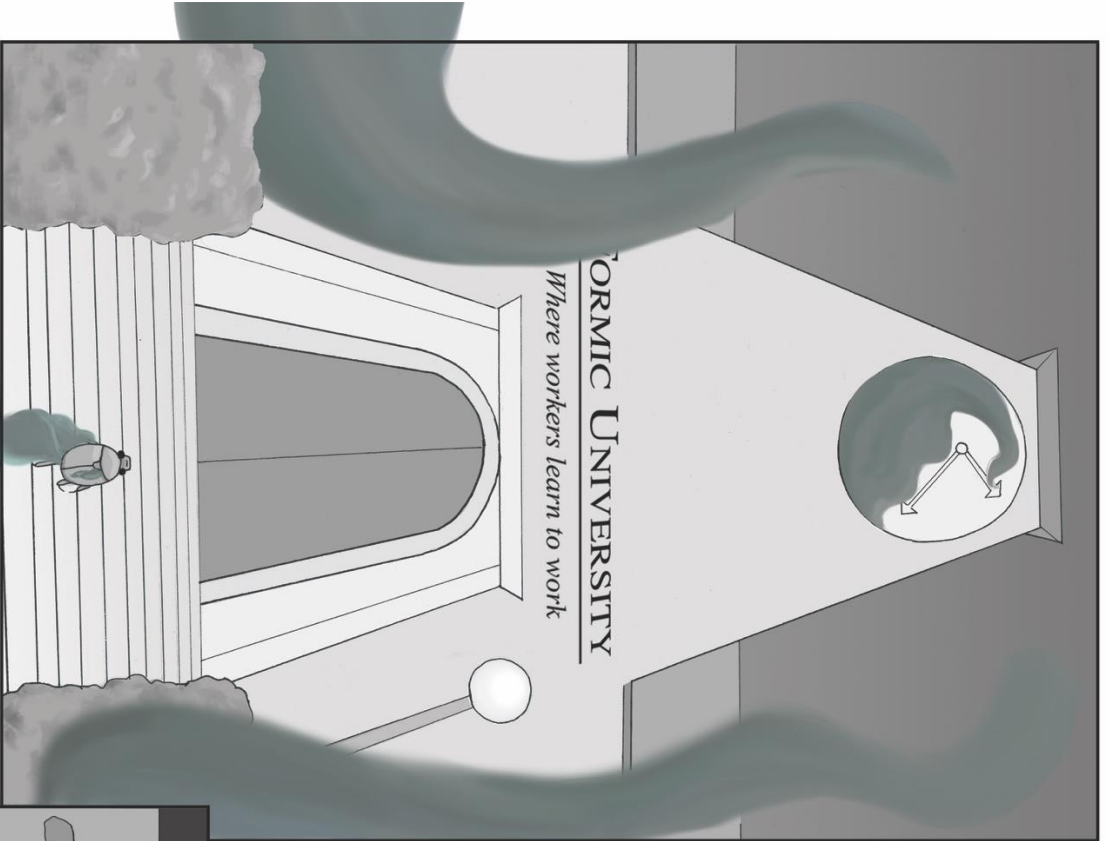
Intensity is not necessarily needed to communicate the gravity of a situation. This is seen when Leah, the beetle, encounters the Void for the first time as a physical space (Fig 3). The Void is a place inside hard-backed insects, such as beetles, where they can go to escape. The Void is specifically related to the beetle and is housed in its back so as to directly relate to Leah’s identity as a beetle and her experience with getting stuck on her back. This scene is one of the most significant moments in the novel. For this reason, it appears as a full-page splash, bleeding to the edge of the page. According to Spiegelman (2011:175), “[a] large panel allows you to enter, pause, and understand the importance of a moment”. Furthermore, the lack of border creates a sense of timelessness (McCloud, 1993). The panel can thus be read as quiet and slow and the Void gains a feeling of pervasiveness. This is further emphasized by the following four frames that are essentially empty (only depicting the grey of the Void). The Void attempts to express the more nuanced aspects of living with mental distress. It encompasses aspects that I have yet to make sense of myself. These include the comfort one finds in escapism, the difficulty of separating ‘reality’ from what is supposed to be ‘all in your

⁸ In *I Kill Giants* (2014), the Titan is described as the worst of the giants. It is the Titan that Barbara must eventually face.

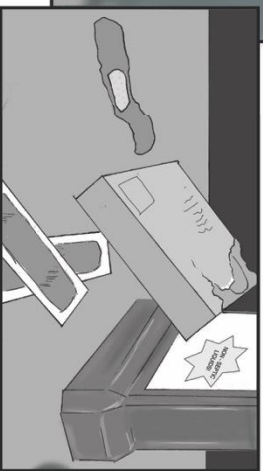
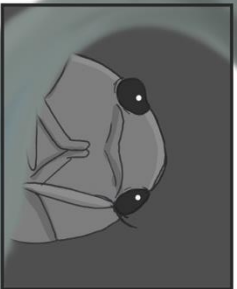
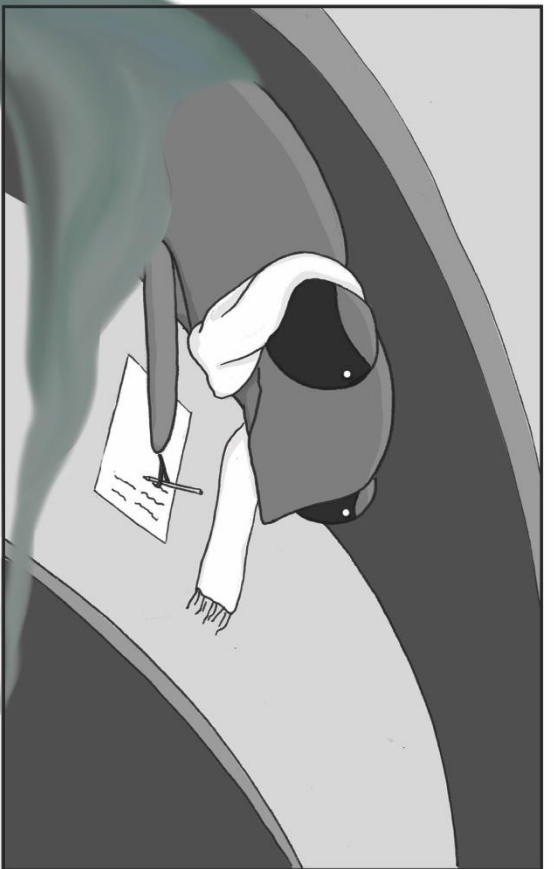
head', and the heaviness of it. The word 'heavy' is metaphoric in itself, but the ability of the Void to 'slip out' (Fig 4) is an attempt to express the almost tangible feeling of being in the worst part of depression. It is as if the emptiness becomes solid and weighs you down, obscures your view and feels out of control. You can't exactly push 'nothing' back inside, can you?



Figure 3: Tayla Shan Solomon, page 59, full splash page, *The Adventures of A-Bug!* (2019)



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Figure 4: Tayla Shan Solomon, pages 74 & 75, double page spread, *The Adventures of A-Bug!* (2019)

I struggled to find the right words to use in the paragraph above. I felt I could not escape the use of metaphorical language. This stands testament to the appropriateness of using metaphor to provide expression for psychological distress. “[M]etaphor [taken] as a conceptual phenomenon is capable of organizing our thought” (Kövecses, 2005:163). Thus, metaphor is communicated conceptually, not linguistically. Meanings garnered from a metaphor are also potentially personal and subjective, allowing for different interpretations of these metaphors with which readers may personally identify.

1.2. Beetles in ants’ nests, mice among cats: Anthropomorphism as a tool to express social dynamics

The metaphors discussed in the above section portray very personal experiences of distress. They are experiences in which the individual suffers. Symbolism may help to give a clear idea of what an experience of suffering may be like. However, when it comes to the portrayal of human suffering, it is important to not only be explicit, but to also be sensitive. The technique of anthropomorphism has historically been used for this purpose in works such as Franz Kafka’s *Metamorphosis* (1915). According to Duncan, Smith & Levitz (2009:206), “anthropomorphism acts as a mirror, allowing the storyteller to reflect human characteristics [...] back upon the readers in order to enlighten them about the human condition”.

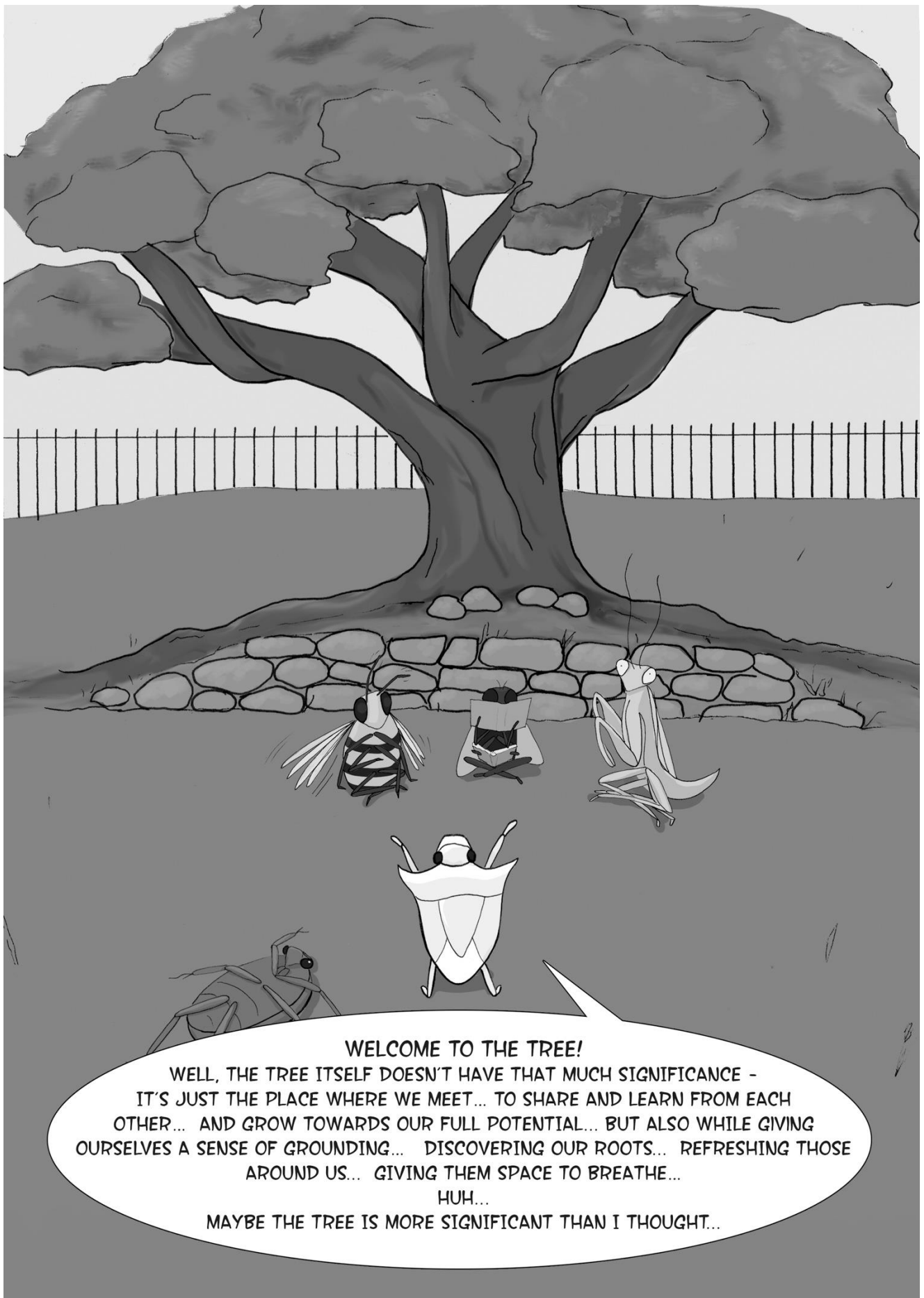
The Adventures of A-Bug! (2019) uses the struggles of a Christmas beetle at a university established around the cultural norms and capabilities of ants to describe how those with mental health struggles may feel othered in everyday life. The metaphor of insects in *The Adventures of A-Bug!* (2019) may call into question notions of empathy and understanding across differences. If one is able to empathise with the suffering of an insect, one should be able to better understand the struggles of other humans despite not having the same experience or way of living. This is in relation to acts of othering and stigma – both can be fought through understanding and both are a common social factor in experiences of distress. Spiegelman’s *Maus* (1986) also uses anthropomorphism as it can allow for engagement with sensitive subject matter. *Maus* (1986) is a holocaust narrative that uses mice to represent Jewish people in contrast to the representation of Germans as cats. Spiegelman (1998, in Thormann, 2002:128) summarises the book as “an autobiographical history of [his] relationship with [his] father, a survivor of the Nazi death camps”. The use of anthropomorphism can be read as a way of Spiegelman coming to terms with and sensitively representing the suffering that his father experienced.

1.2.1. Difference

Thormann (2002:130) states that “animals’ stories reveal eternal truths, and especially the truths of power relations”. In *The Adventures of A-Bug!* (2019) the overarching theme uses the differences between ants and Christmas beetles to represent concepts of normality produced by ideas and stigmas surrounding mental health. Thormann (2002:125) describes psychology as “the regime of knowledge, the epistemological frame, which enforces the regime of power”. The current disease model of psychology potentially disregards the fact that, like different kinds of animals, people are all intrinsically different from each other. This means that it is unhelpful to view some groups of people as strange or abnormal. Leah Onnerback is a Christmas beetle who goes to a university where being ant-like is normal and behaving or thinking in other ways is abnormal. This is established on page 6 of the novel where the university is seen for the first time. The university is named ‘Formic University’ derived from the formic acid that ants produce. The slogan for the university is ‘Where workers learn to work’ referring to the worker ants – female ants who make up the majority of ant colonies. The slogan alludes to ideas of ants being hard workers. It parallels busy ant colonies with a capitalist society that measures an individual’s value by their level of productivity. This is a particularly difficult environment to be in for someone who struggles with productivity, such as someone who is experiencing depression. The danger of such an environment is alluded to by the name of the university as formic acid is not toxic to ants, but to other organisms. Christmas beetles are also seasonal. They appear during the summer months. This is referenced on the first page of the novel. This seasonality would further emphasise the difficulty of being a beetle in an ant’s world and alludes to seasonal experiences of mental distress such as what is known as Seasonal Affective Disorder. These difficult experiences are compounded by the stigma that surrounds mental health.

This othering has been represented in my graphic novel by the choice of insect for each character. The character shares some qualities with the insect by which they are represented. For example, Themba is a character who appears in Leah’s life in a rather unorthodox manner. He is a rebel and outsider in the story and is a stinkbug (Solomon, 2019). Stinkbugs, like Christmas beetles, are very different from ants in physicality and behaviour. They are especially known for producing a foul smell when threatened (McGavin, 1993). This quality suggests that Themba may not be very well liked by other insects and even avoided, making this choice of insect apt for the character who does not conform to the civilities of ant-like socialisation. Stinkbugs also tend to live in trees, suggesting they are separate from the

predominating ant colonies who live underground. This habitat is referenced by the tree that Themba likes to spend time under (Fig 5) and thus may conceptually distance the character from the ants who represent the 'norm'. Using insects to represent these different kinds of people allows one to comment on and even critique social norms without directly attacking any individual or group of people. It also allows one to portray suffering without capitalising on someone's pain or alienating readers by showing their pain too graphically. Anthropomorphism can be viewed as a way of "showing something too profane for depiction" (Spiegelman, 2011:117).



WELCOME TO THE TREE!
WELL, THE TREE ITSELF DOESN'T HAVE THAT MUCH SIGNIFICANCE -
IT'S JUST THE PLACE WHERE WE MEET... TO SHARE AND LEARN FROM EACH
OTHER... AND GROW TOWARDS OUR FULL POTENTIAL... BUT ALSO WHILE GIVING
OURSELVES A SENSE OF GROUNDING... DISCOVERING OUR ROOTS... REFRESHING THOSE
AROUND US... GIVING THEM SPACE TO BREATHE...
HUH...
MAYBE THE TREE IS MORE SIGNIFICANT THAN I THOUGHT...

Figure 5: Tayla Shan Solomon, page 55, full splash page, *The Adventures of A-Bug!* (2019)

1.2.2. Sensitivity

The Holocaust is one of the worst cases of genocide in human history. As such, this tragedy is difficult to understand for those who have not experienced it. It also makes for subject matter that requires sensitive handling. The misrepresentation of suffering or the overrepresentation of suffering would be damaging for those who have experienced it due to the trauma and psychological pain that accompanies it. However, Spiegelman's use of anthropomorphism shifts the perspective in a way that makes the subject matter more approachable. As Spiegelman (2011:127) describes: "[...] it's those animal masks that allowed me to approach otherwise unsayable things".

In *Maus* (1986) each animal represents a different nationality and thus simulates the social persecution experienced by Jews. The choice of mouse for the character does not necessarily imply that the character is, for example, timid, but rather that the mice are helpless to the power of the cats. According to Ewert (2000:92):

[t]he image of Jews as rodents is not original to Spiegelman. The first volume's epigraph, Hitler's observation that 'the Jews are undoubtedly a race, but they are not human' [...], justifies a dehumanizing metaphor

Spiegelman deliberately draws attention to the metaphor by incorporating actual masks (Fig 6). The mice in the novel wear masks of different animals to represent how Jews were forced to hide their identity in order to survive. In another scene, there is a man who is protesting that he is not Jewish as the authorities think, but that he is German. As this scene plays out the man shifts from being a mouse to a cat (Fig 7). These moments seem absurd when played out as animals in masks or animals that seem to shape-shift based on the belief of someone else. According to Ewert (2000:101), "Spiegelman intends to highlight the arbitrariness of his artistic choices in order to point to the arbitrariness of Hitler's choice".



Figure 6: Art Spiegelman, panels from page 64, *Maus, A Survivor's Tale I: My Father Bleeds History* (1986)



Figure 7: Art Spiegelman, panels from page 50, *Maus, A Survivor's Tale II: And Here My Troubles Began* (1991)

1.2.3. Humanising

What is interesting to note in *Maus* (1986) is that these randomly attributed differences to nationality, represented by different animals, is still seen in the present. The present Vladek and Art are still mice who interact with other animals, not humans. This may suggest that the effects of social constructions, such as those promoted by the Nazi regime that Jews are ‘vermin’ (Ewert, 2000), are enduring. However, Spiegelman claims that the metaphor is “meant to be shucked like a snake skin” (Witek, 1989:112).

One of the ways in which he does so is by including mouse tails at the beginning of the narrative, but not doing so all the time and eventually not at all (Fig 8). This loss of tails literally makes the characters more human. This allows the reader to better relate to the experiences of these mice and in doing so be able to better understand those experiences in relation to their own experiences. Moreover, Spiegelman’s cartoons are simplified representations of mice. McCloud (1993) notes that through this kind of simplification the characters of comics become easier for the reader to identify with. They become a kind of a “blank slate” (McCloud, 1993:37) on which to project oneself. As Spiegelman (1994, in Doherty, 1996:74) states, the cartoons are “invested with personhood; they stand upright and affirm their humanity. Cartoons personalize; they give specific form to stereotype”.

Time flies...



Figure 8: Art Spiegelman, page 41, *Maus, A Survivor's Tale II: And Here My Troubles Began* (1991)

I have adopted similar strategies in *The Adventures Of A-Bug!* (2019). As the novel progresses, the depiction of Leah becomes increasingly more simplified and more humanoid.

The first image of Leah is a realistic representation of a Christmas beetle (except for the fact that she stands upright on her hind legs) (Fig 9). I began to simplify the style due to time constraints, but chose to leave in the more realistic drawings at the beginning. Leah becomes more humanoid in that her head becomes proportionally larger, her hind legs become longer and able to be straightened completely, and she gains eyelids. The changes in her body enable her to do more human things, like crossing her legs or have lowered eyelids which convey feelings such as comfort, exhaustion and anger. The reader may feel disconnected from the insect they are presented with at the beginning, but by the end of the novel will be more able to identify with Leah. This echoes the way in which people may feel disconnected until they have taken the time to get to know each other. There is a scene in the novel where Leah is feeling disconnected from herself. People struggling with mental health often assert that they do not feel like themselves. In this scene (Fig 10), Leah is looking into her bathroom mirror before brushing her teeth – a singularly human practice. Her reflection is the realistic depiction of an insect, with her front foot awkwardly holding a tube of toothpaste, but not mirroring the curled humanoid position of the ‘real’ Leah’s ‘hand’. This scene highlights the disconnect between how one would relate to a common Christmas beetle and the way one relates to the character of Leah, as well as between Leah and her struggling self.

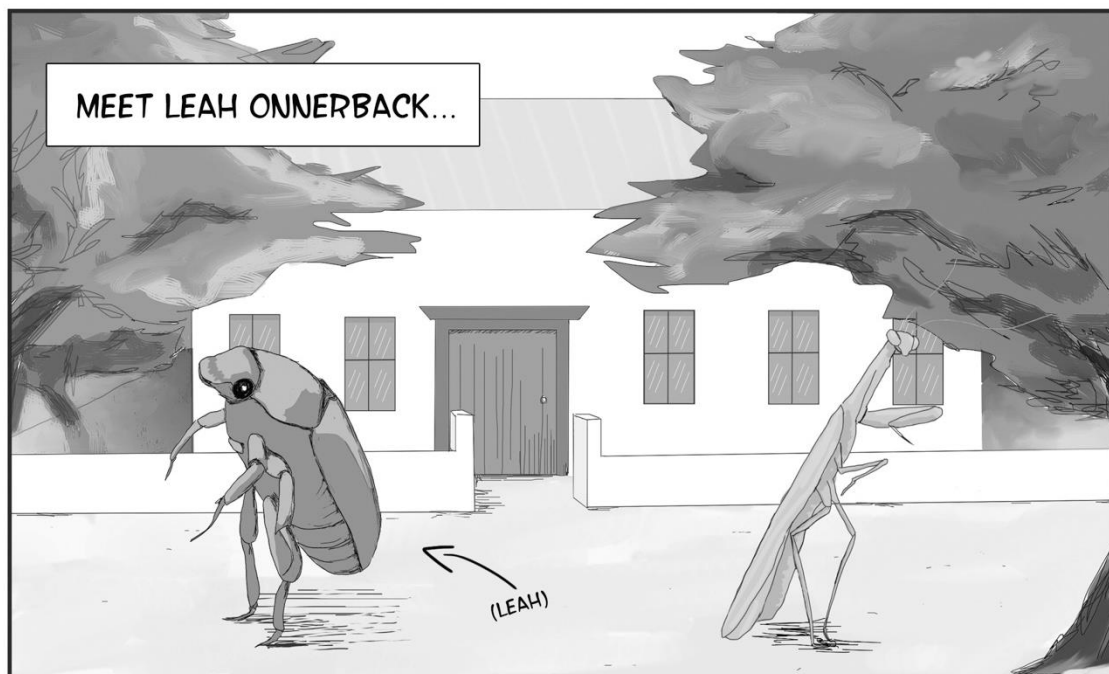
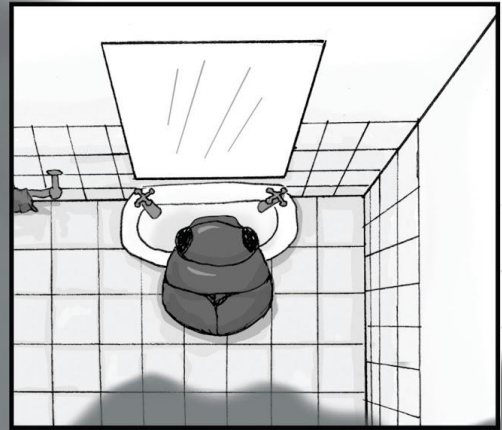


Figure 9: Tayla Shan Solomon, panel on page 2, *The Adventures of A-Bug!* (2019)



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Figure 10: Tayla Shan Solomon, page 73, full splash page,
The Adventures of A-Bug! (2019)

1.2.4. Clothes

In addition to the loss of tails and the simplified style, the animals in *Maus* (1986) wear clothes and walk upright. In *Maus* (1986) the clothes help the mice to be read as human. Additionally, McCloud (2006) states that clothes have the ability to make characters visually distinct. They act as “a unique visual reminder of characters' different personalities” (McCloud, 2006:71). An interaction between the father and son in the story, Vladek and Art, is centred around a coat (Fig 11). Art Spiegelman and his father are represented as mice with human-like clothed bodies (Spiegelman, 1986). As Artie (the character of Art Speigelman in the story) is preparing to leave after an evening of recording his father’s account, he discovers that Vladek has thrown his coat away. Vladek claims it is too “shabby” and gives Artie one of his own coats (Spiegelman, 1986:69). Artie is upset, disliking the style of the coat and the fact that it is “too big” (Spiegelman, 1986:69). The metaphorical size is found here again - the protagonist is highlighted as small in comparison to his father. Shuldiner (2002:109) highlights Art’s father's “belittlement”, asserting that Art is a survivor of his father’s treatment of him, just as Vladek is a survivor of the Holocaust. The size of the coat could also point to a certain kind of status that comes with being a survivor and the mammoth task of recording the harrowing event through his father.



Figure 11: Art Spiegelman, panel on page 69, *Maus, A Survivor's Tale I: My Father Bleeds History* (1986)

A scene that expresses Spiegelman's anxieties surrounding his identity and authorship can be found where he has chosen to depict himself, as the author, as a man wearing a mouse mask (Fig 8). This scene is significant in that Spiegelman (1991:41) points out that he has "been feeling depressed" following the success of the first *Maus* (1986). Yet, because of the publicity of the book perhaps, Spiegelman feels the need to put on a face that represents his Jewish identity, even if he may feel disconnected from it. Kincade (2013:10) notes that this image may reveal Spiegelman to be struggling to relate to what his father went through, but that the pile of dead mice "forces the reader to come to terms with the fact that they cannot wholly understand such an event without having experienced it". This may reflect how

Spiegelman feels the need to identify as Jewish, yet draw attention to the idea of it being a facade.

The masks worn by the animals in *Maus* (1986) are a means of survival. The masks require the individual to hide their true identity and pretend to be someone else in order to survive in a society where one's identity has been cast as 'other'. Those who struggle with mental health have been relegated to the realm of 'other' through years of stigma and a lack of understanding. Mental distress has become stigmatised through associations with deviant behaviour, especially that which is, or is close to, criminal behaviour (Kinderman, 2014). This is seen in the history of comics, particularly in the widely known superhero comics. In fact, Bender et al. (2011, in Farthing & Priego, 2016:3) notes that in comics psychiatric terms have been "misapplied to explain villainy". This is seen in Batman where many of the characters are 'criminally insane' (Goodwin, & Tajjudin, 2016). These representations of 'insanity' influence the perspectives of mental distress (Goodwin, & Tajjudin, 2016). This stigma is exemplified in *I Kill Giants* (2011) in the attitude of Barbara's older sister and care-giver. When she addresses the issue of Barbara slapping the school psychologist, her first words associate the behaviour with madness, saying, "You hit a freaking teacher? Are you completely mental?" (Kelly, 2011:np). This stigmatisation of mental distress is also exemplified where other children ask Barbara if she is "Wet the bed crazy or Columbine crazy?" (Kelly, 2011:np) – in reference to the Columbine shooting of 1999. The othering of those with mental health conditions extends into psychiatric practices themselves. Weiten (2013:576) notes that "psychological disorders involve value judgements about what represents normal or abnormal behaviour". This subjectivity is used in diagnoses - one of the three criteria for diagnosing mental illness is that the behaviour deviates from the cultural norm (Weiten, 2013). Thus, the heavily stigmatised identity of someone who struggles with mental health, often needs to be hidden in order for the individual to be accepted by society. Thus, a kind of mask is necessary in day to day life. The character of Leah is my own mask that has helped me to be able to talk about my experience without touching too many nerves. The wounds are still fresh, but Leah's exoskeleton protects me from too much harm - just as it protects her. In a similar respect to Spiegelman (2011:127), I too use "masks" to allow me to talk candidly about difficult subject matter.

Leah herself has also experimented with taking on different identities. This is alluded to at the end of the first chapter (Fig 12). We see a full bird's eye view of her room. In it, there are many hats all around her room - more than one might expect an insect to own - but she is never seen wearing any of them. The hats reference the idiom 'to wear many hats'. It suggests

that throughout Leah's life she has had to shift her identity to inhabit the different roles required of her by society.



Figure 12: Tayla Shan Solomon, page 21, *The Adventures of A-Bug!* (2019)

The irony of anthropomorphism is that, when used strategically and skilfully, it creates a humanising effect. Another's experience becomes easier to understand by viewing it from a different perspective. As Moss-Wellington (2017:20) states, "anthropomorphising is all that we can do to understand the experience of a life not our own. 'Humanising the other' involves a projection of what it might be like to be another entity". This strategy in comics is used in combination with other forms of symbolism and emblematic imagery to provide more information about the specific character.

1.3. Getting to know the characters

The visual arts medium of comics is considered to be "capable of complex and profound expression" (Dziedric & Peacock, 1997, in Duncan, Smith & Levitz, 2009:1). In this section I explore how visual imagery is used to communicate and enable a deeper understanding of characters. Visual imagery can stand in place of something else, such as a beetle symbolising a human, which creates straightforward parallels to be unpacked. However in many cases, symbolic imagery tends to refine a certain quality or aspect of the situation or character in the story. Duncan, Smith & Levitz (2009:134) describe symbols as a "means of economy of expression in comics". However, it is not the only way to express information visually. According to Duncan, Smith & Levitz (2009:146), "[t]he very manner in which an artist draws a line has expressive power". This section explores how clothing, colour and psychological images can help create a deeper understanding of the characters.

1.3.1 Clothes and colours

Clothing in the form of masks and hats has been shown to be a means of hiding for the characters in *Maus* (1986) and *The Adventures of A-Bug!* (2019). However, clothing has also long been thought to be an extension of the self – a signifier of identity. In this case clothing may help to reveal something of the character's identity. Furthermore, it can be read as the character asserting their identity through their clothing as seen in *I Kill Giants* (2011). The novel's main character, Barbara, is not like the rest of her classmates. From the first pages of the novel, she is set up as different: Before a full body visual of Barbara is provided to us, all we see of her are two hands holding up an immense book and out from behind the book poke two rabbit ears. When we do see Barbara for the first time (Fig 13), she is the centre of a "heroically imposing, upward-gazing image" (Church, 2018:133). The pair of fake rabbit ears she wears make her stand out from her classmates. However, rather than establishing Barbara

as abnormal in relation to her mental health, it can be argued that it shows her confidence in her sense of self. Church (2018:133) confirms how “she dominates, being depicted as powerful and quite intimidating in her assertiveness”. While she may seem to be radically different to her classmates, in this frame she is the only one depicted in detail and is thus the focus of the panel. Her sense of self is apparent if one examines the details. This could be seen as our formal introduction to her. The precursory pages show Barbara in a blanket fort (Kelly, 2011). There is a piece of fabric with a knight on a horse and a ghoulish looking giant. We later in the novel find out that she plays the dungeon master for a group of *Dungeons and Dragons* (Gygax & Arneson, 1974) players (Kelly, 2011). These details suggest that Barbara enjoys fantasy. With this in mind, one could deduce that the rabbit ears are a reference to Barbara’s identity, rather than an indicator of psychological or any other form of abnormality. Her t-shirt has a skull on the chest, bringing to mind the emblem of a superhero, but also acting as a signifier. The skull may be read as a clue to the issue with which Barbara is battling. Her mother’s impending death stays close to her heart as she struggles with it. But in a bid to comply, she resists fear, and showing strength, turns her fear into the proud emblem of a hero.



Figure 13: Joe Kelly & JM Ken Nimmura, double page spread, *I Kill Giants* (2011)

McCloud (1993:188) notes that when colours were introduced into superhero comics they took on an “iconic power”. The costumes of superheroes meant that they were represented in the same colours over and over. Similar to the emblem of a hero, the colours of the costumes eventually came to “symbolize characters in the mind of the reader” (McCloud, 1993:188). A similar phenomenon is seen in Brosh’s choice of clothing colour for her character. Brosh’s character is depicted almost exclusively in a bright pink dress, even in the depictions of her as a child (Fig 14).

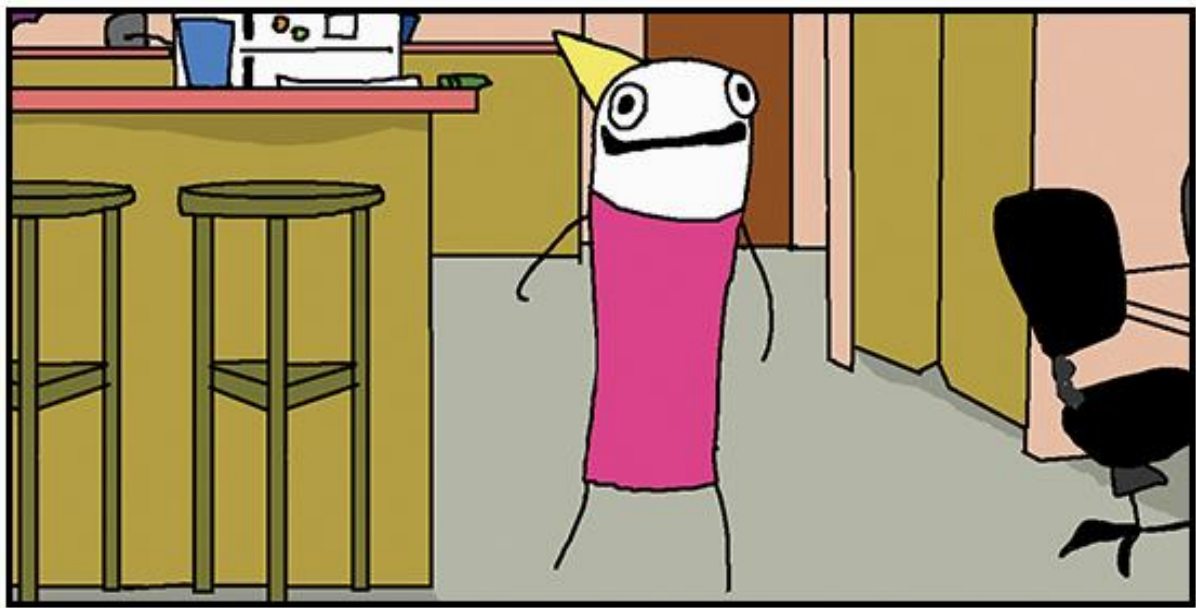


Figure 14: Allie Brosh, *Hyperbole and a Half* (2013)

The pink comes to signify the character, but another piece of clothing is introduced in the chapter titled ‘Depression Part 1’. It is a grey hoodie, the colour of which offsets the perky cheerfulness of the pink (Fig 15). Before bracing herself to do the daunting task of returning rented movies, Brosh notes that she gets dressed first: “I put on some clothes, put the movies in my backpack, and biked to the video store” (Brosh, 2013:np). The clothes that she has put on include the pink dress and an incredibly well-worn hoodie. I don’t know if everyone can relate to the iconic hoodie, or if it is just a depressed person thing, but putting on a hoodie before leaving the house can feel like putting on armour. First, it’s the comfiest thing you own - putting on uncomfortable clothes for the sake of looking good is just not logical to the depressed brain. It also hides the fact that you didn’t care enough to put on a bra. Also, with some strategic hair placement, you can hide those puffy red eyes. This way no-one will ask what you have been crying about because you know the answer is either “I don’t know” or

“everything” - this makes for confusing, uncomfortable and unwanted conversations between acquaintances. Hoodies make it easier to avoid these kinds of things. It becomes a means of protection similar to an exoskeleton.

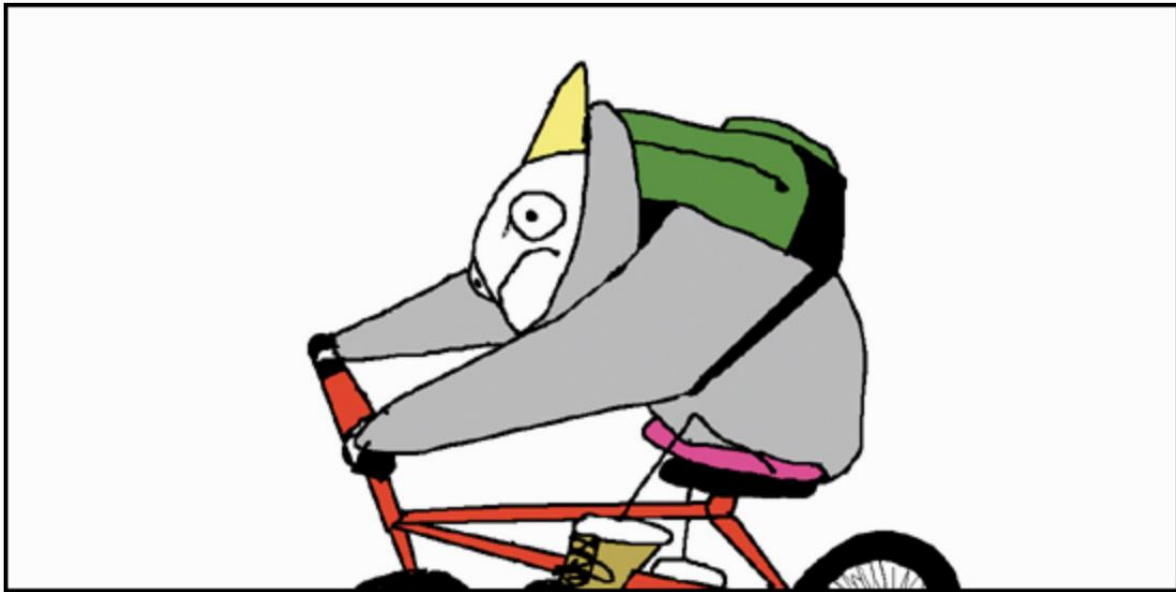
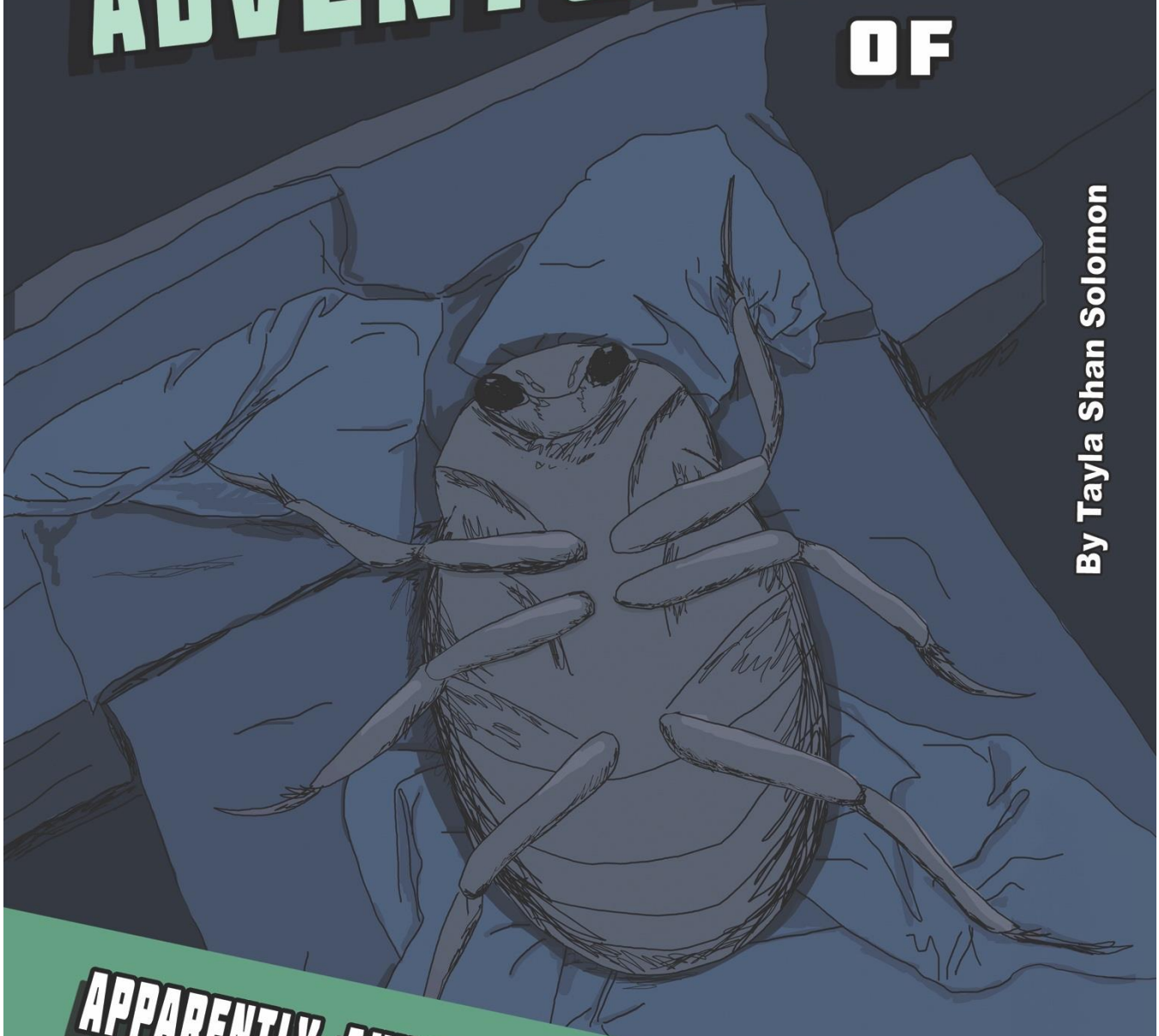


Figure 15: Allie Brosh, *Hyperbole and a Half* (2013)

Brosh’s expression in figure 15 shows the determination she experiences when the hoodie has been donned. The corners of her mouth are downturned, creating a grimace. And her bottom lip pushes up, suggesting she is gritting her teeth - she is resolute. Her eyebrows are lowered, also indicating determination, but they push down onto wide-open eyes, still giving us a sense of her vulnerability. These wide-open eyes are typical of Brosh’s representation of her character. In addition to providing her character with many expressions of bewilderment, the eyes may be telling of Brosh’s open, and candid approach to sharing her story in so much detail and honesty. The hoodie may be read as her worst moments of depression. The hoodie is an iconic piece of clothing in the function that it has for someone who is depressed. It is also depicted as dirty, referencing the difficulty in completing simple tasks such as laundry - something to which Brosh alludes earlier in the book. The grey colour references the lack of vitality experienced by someone who suffers from depression. The grey is in strong contrast to the pink of the dress. The contrast of these two colours that the character wears highlights the difference between the moments of deep depression and other, more manageable experiences. A similar use of colour to create contrast is seen on the cover of *The Adventures of A-Bug!* (2019) (Fig 16). The title alludes to classic comic book serials such as *The Adventures of Superman*. These comics usually use bright primary colours to speak to the

excitement and action contained in them. However, *The Adventures of A-Bug!* (2019) uses a muted blue for the cover. This is in contrast to what the title suggests and connects with the sarcasm in the title. The blue suggests that it is night-time, and the image is of Leah lying alone on her bed. The title is slapped across the image of Leah as if trying to label her story as exciting, but Leah, in her passive pose and quiet setting, negates this. It suggests that motivational sayings, such as 'Life is an adventure', are fairly ineffective for someone in the grips of depression.

THE ADVENTURES OF



By Tayla Shan Solomon

**APPARENTLY-ANYONE-CAN-DO-IT-IF-THEY-JUST-TRY
BUG!**

L
PG
13

Figure 16: Tayla Shan Solomon, cover of *The Adventures of A-Bug!* (2019)

1.3.2. States of mind and feelings

The colour on the cover may then represent a state of mind. According to Duncan, Smith & Levitz (2009:160) a “psychological image represents some aspect of a character’s personality or state of mind”. In *The Adventures of A-Bug!* (2019) the Void itself can be viewed as a psychological image. Where the colours of the Void are present outside of the Void it suggests that her state of mind is colouring her view of the world. In *I Kill Giants* (2011), there are moments where one can guess that someone is talking to Barbara about her mother. This subject is sensitive to Barbara and she is refusing to acknowledge her mother’s condition - seen in the way that she physically avoids seeing her mother. This refusal to engage is seen in these moments where someone is talking, but the words in their speech balloon are scratched out, “as though she is blocking them out by sheer will-power” (Church, 2018:136). Psychological images are metaphorical and may not be necessarily real for all the characters in the story, but may be true for the nature of a specific character’s psyche. Barbara, self-proclaimed giant-slayer, not only encounters giants, but is also accompanied by various fantastical creatures portrayed in simple lines that seemingly glow and float (Fig 17). Church (2018:154) suggests that these “sprites and fairies remind us of how young she is”. It also points to Barbara’s use of imagination as a general coping mechanism. Even when the giant is gone at the end of the story, we still see a fairy with a mallet, suggesting that Barbara still uses imagination and fantasy to fight her daily battles.



Figure 17: Joe Kelly & JM Ken Niimura, panel from *I Kill Giants* (2011)

Psychological images can point to a kind of emotional state. Emotions can be portrayed through facial expressions but also through forms of symbolism (McCloud, 2006). In a scene in *I Kill Giants* (2011) Barbara is so angry with the school counsellor that she slaps her (Fig 18). Her anger here is portrayed by the “bold lines of sound and speed” (Church, 2018:154) and her “savage teeth” (Church, 2018:154). These teeth are sharp and animal-like. They could be read as representative of the raw, unbridled emotions of a child. In contrast to the control and rationality with which adults can handle emotions, the emotional intelligence of a child can seem almost animalistic.



Figure 18: Joe Kelly & JM Ken Niimura, panel from *I Kill Giants* (2011)

Signifiers are used to portray Leah Onnerback's anger. Lines reminiscent of steam come off the top of her head (Figs 19 and 20). They point to metaphorical associations of anger with body heat found in expressions such as 'hot under the collar' or 'hot-headed' (Kövecses, 2005). In figure 20, the panel distorts with edges askew and Leah's speech bubble becomes wavy and pushes outside of the panel border. Here Leah has lost her temper. The contrast of the previous ordered and regular panels highlights the chaos of this one. It suggests that in losing her temper, Leah has lost control of herself, in a similar way to Barbara. However, Leah has realised that overt displays of emotion, especially anger, do not lead to co-operative administration insects. Leah is fighting against the association of unbridled display of strong emotions with ideas of 'madness'. Unlike Barbara, Leah has had practice in complying with this unspoken no-emotions-in-public rule. Thus she reins in her emotions and adds in an overcompensatory "Please".



Figure 19: Tayla Shan Solomon, panel on page 40, *The Adventures of A-Bug!* (2019)



Figure 20: Tayla Shan Solomon, panels on page 14, *The Adventures of A-Bug!* (2019)

1.4 Conclusion

McCloud (2000:10) proposes that “[...] comics can yield a body of work worthy of study and meaningfully represent the life, times and world-view of the author”. The medium’s ability to layer symbolism and signifiers over each other to create complex understandings of characters and events within the story supports this statement. Metaphors can be shown visually making them immediately evident to the reader. Visual analysis reveals that images can also be given meaning through composition, style and colour. Metaphors are able to shift one’s perspective in order to gain a better understanding of the situation, in this case, an experience of mental distress. However, meanings are not fed to the reader. Instead, the generous use of symbolism in graphic novels engages the reader’s imagination and encourages a conscious attempt to understand. Anthropomorphism can also reveal aspects of a character, making their personalities clearer through shared characteristics. The metaphors in comics may act as a kind

of mask, protecting the author or the person whose story is being told. Colours and other signifiers allow the reader to see the nuances of the experience and emotions of the characters. Metaphors, particularly anthropomorphism, are also able to create the necessary amount of distance between sensitive subject matter and the author and/or reader. This opens up space for conversations about mental distress to be had. All these things brought together in one medium allow the reader to employ their imaginations and sensitively engage in the current crisis of mental distress.

Chapter 2: Framing

Framing can be defined as “the process by which a communication source constructs and defines a social or political issue for its audience” (Nelson, Oxley, & Clawson, 1997:221). It is based on the notion that “an issue can be viewed from a variety of perspectives and be construed as having implications for multiple values or considerations” (Chong & Druckman, 2007:104). Frames influence the attitudes and actions of people toward an issue (Chong & Druckman, 2007). Thormann (2002:125) describes Psychology as an “epistemological frame” that exerts power through “the internalised disciplining of the private sphere”. Martin Barker (1989:213) similarly notes that Psychology is “a powerful discourse, defining people, constructing their identities”. The dominant framework of psychology does not acknowledge that “definitions of mental health problems rely largely upon definitions of normality” (Cromby, Harper & Reavey, 2013: 61). What is ‘normal’ differs according to cultural, societal and individual understandings (Cromby, Harper & Reavey, 2013). Kinderman (2014:133) supports this critique, stating that “there are different opinions on whether particular experiences are seen as signs of ‘mental illness’, as normal (religious and spiritual beliefs and beliefs about spirit possession) or even as ‘spiritual gifts’, which are to be revered to some degree (such as in the case of shamen)”. However, despite the research into the variance of distress, psychopathology still measures distress by positioning it against ideas of ‘normal’ (Weiten, 2013). This frames mental distress as abnormal and infers that people who experience mental distress are abnormal and need to be changed to suit the ‘norm’.

In *Hyperbole and a Half* (2013), Allie Brosh repeatedly refers to ‘normality’ and expressly positions herself outside of that ‘norm’ from the beginning of the book. In the first chapter, titled ‘Warning signs’, she writes letters to various instances of her past self. In them, she describes her younger self’s behaviour and contrasts it to that of “normal children” (Brosh, 2013:np). She concludes these letters with an address to the other past instances of herself thanking them for “not being so goddam weird” (Brosh, 2013:np). Also noted is Brosh’s crude, yet expressive, drawing style, that further emphasises her perceived abnormality (Fig 21). In an interview, Brosh (2013) states that the way she draws her character feels like a more authentic representation of herself than if she had to portray her character realistically. This suggests that the way she sees herself is in contrast to how a ‘normal’ human would look. The title of this chapter suggests that these ‘abnormal’ childhood instances are somehow related to Brosh’s experience of distress in her adult life. The choice of title here behaves in a similar way to how psychology has framed mental health considerations as states of normal and

abnormal behaviour. Kinderman (2014:14) highlights the concern that “reductionist, biomedical approaches to mental disorder, the diagnostic systems that are used to classify people’s problems, and the explanations that people are given, can lead to forms of care that are both dehumanising and lacking in humanity”.

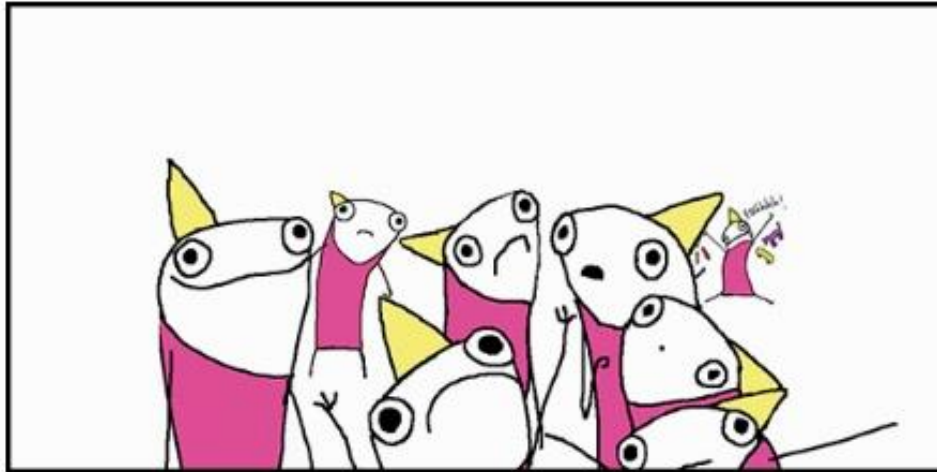


Figure 21: Allie Brosh, panel from *Hyperbole and a Half* (2013)

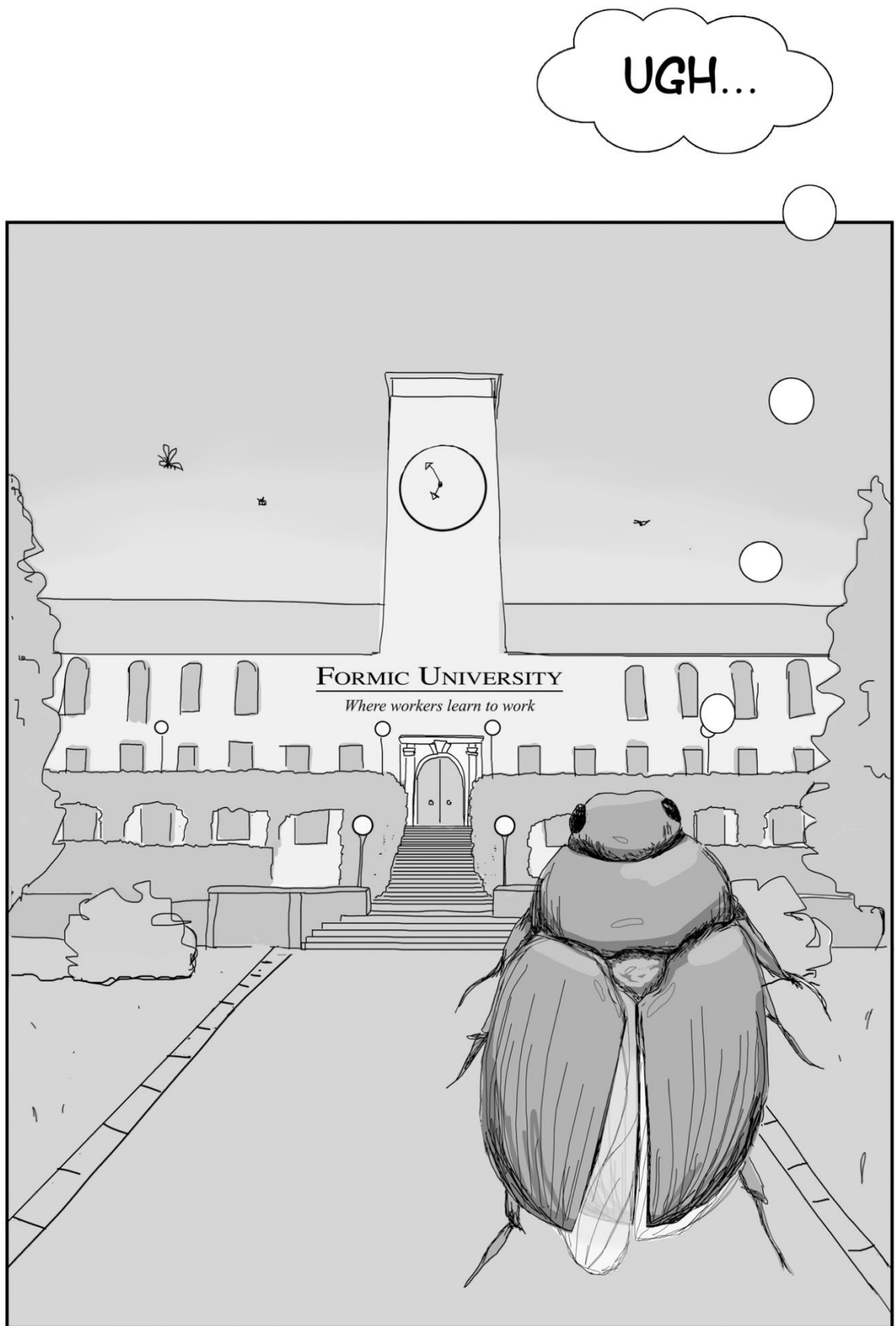
The first section of this chapter explores how the manipulation of the panel border may disrupt the regular order of things. This technique is read in parallel to Psychology’s framing of distress as abnormal behaviour. Later in the chapter, I explore how humour may be used to critique the current dominant framing of psychology. I also explore how humour may be an apt approach to dealing with mental health struggles in that it may foster connections between people. It can also be viewed as framing experiences of mental health as absurd and difficult to understand or explain. In the third section of this chapter, I explore how narratives frame experiences. I argue that context is important, and this is highlighted by the sequential art of comics. Each image is ‘framed’ by the other images before and after it, allowing the character’s experience to be read within a framework of situational and emotional context.

2.1 Little boxes: The impact of a narrow perspective of normal

Frames exist literally within comics – as panel borders. In fact, they are considered by McCloud (1993:98) to be “comics’ most important icon”. They create clarity in reading with the panel border being “our guide through time and space” (McCloud, 1993:102). Panels provide constraints and the selection of what goes into the panel is a process called

encapsulation (Duncan, Smith & Levitz, 2009:131). Anderson (1989:43) suggests that “art is a metaphor for the life of the human heart and mind”. If this idea is applied to the structure of comics, one could parallel the comic book to the issue of mental distress with the process of encapsulation being likened to Psychology’s framing of distress as abnormal behaviour. The panel frames could then be read as a representation of boundaries – areas of compliance and where one should ‘fit in’.

At the end of chapter one, I explored how Leah’s anger is shown through the use of signifiers such as the lines above her head or the shape of her speech bubble. As mentioned in the above paragraph, the panel border of this image is skew and the speech bubble spills out of the frame. This spilling out can be viewed as an excess of emotions – that which falls outside of the ‘norm’. The name Formic University, in addition to its reference to formic acid, is a play on the word ‘form’ as a verb that suggests the process of change to suit a desired structure – and Leah tries her best to be moulded. However, as much as Leah tries to make her behaviour fit into the required frame, her thought bubbles give her away. Similar to Leah’s outburst of anger, her thought bubbles do not fit into the panel frame. They are always outside the border (Fig 22). In this scene, Leah’s “ugh” (Solomon, 2019:6) shows her true feelings towards the university as she looks at its name on the building. In the next chapter (Fig 23), Leah is polite and compliant as her sociology lecturer interrogates her regarding her absenteeism. She agrees to register herself as a pheromonally challenged student, but as she is leaving, her thought bubble expresses how much she does not want to do it and what that experience would actually mean for her (Fig 24). This positioning of her thoughts outside the conventional panel frame suggests that her thoughts and feelings do not line up with the structure and rules of her society.



6

Figure 22: Tayla Shan Solomon, page 6, *The Adventures of A-Bug!* (2019)

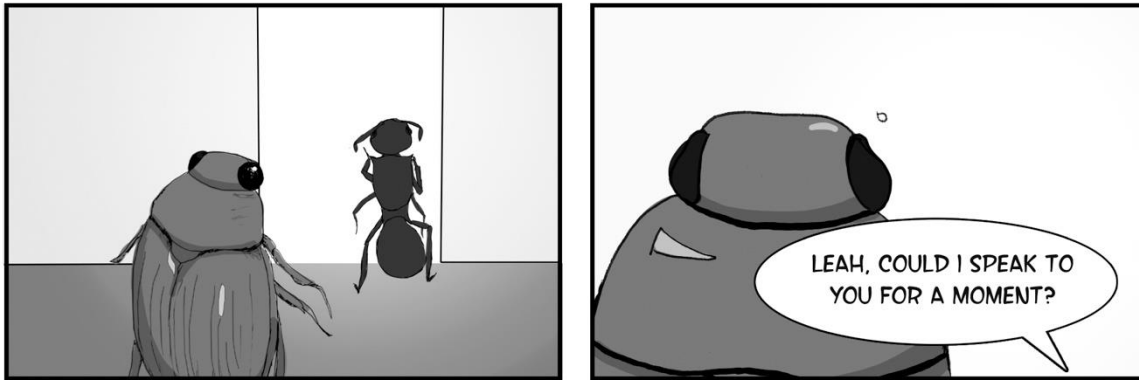


Figure 23: Tayla Shan Solomon, page 10, *The Adventures of A-Bug!* (2019)



GREAT. NOW I HAVE TO SPEND MY DAY RUNNING AROUND AND CONVINCING PEOPLE THAT I SUCK.

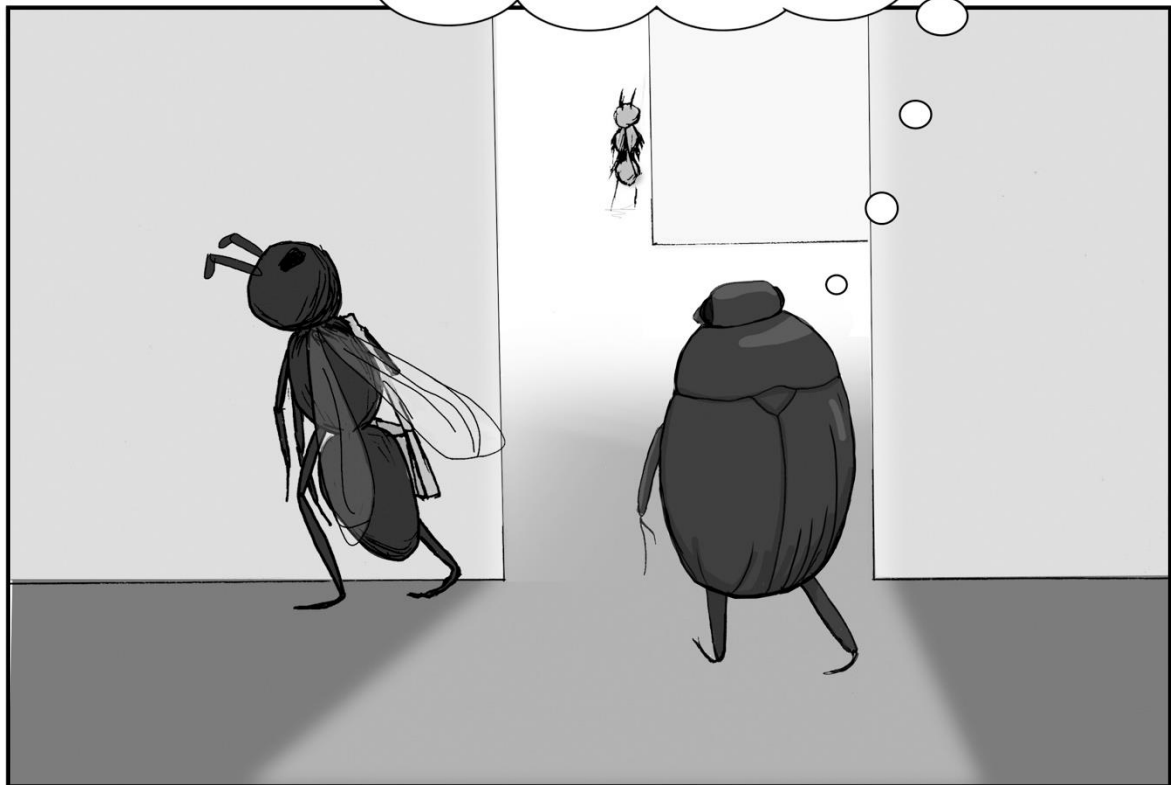


Figure 24: Tayla Shan Solomon, page 11, *The Adventures of A-Bug!* (2019)

Power and framing are themes that are explored in *Maus* (1986). Doherty (1996:77) provides a succinct analysis of the effects of framing in *Maus* (1986) (Figs 25 and 26):

In a purely comic-book composition, Vladek and his first wife Anja confront a series of dead end roads zigzagging like a swastika across the page, the couple trapped in the frame of the comic and of history [...] Another frame assumes the shape of the Star of David and seems to pin Vladek under a spotlight of anti-Semitism [...]



Figure 25: Art Spiegelman, panel on page 125, *Maus, A Survivor's Tale I: My Father Bleeds History* (1986)



Figure 26: Art Spiegelman, panel on page 80, *Maus, A Survivor's Tale I: My Father Bleeds History* (1986)

Art Spiegelman's mother, Anja, suffered from what was diagnosed as depression (Spiegelman, 1986). Spiegelman on at least two occasions adopts a structural technique to show his mother in a moment of distress. The first time this is done (Fig 27), Anja has received a letter in which lies about Vladeck were told: that he has a bad reputation, a lot of girlfriends and is only marrying Anja for her money (Spiegelman, 1986). The panels in which she tells him this are three in a row, with the last panel picturing Anja covering her face with her hands (Spiegelman, 1986). The first two panels are standard rectangular panels, a shape which McCloud (1993:125) describes as "rational and conservative". The third panel is tilted in contrast to the previous frames. McCloud (1993:125) describes a diagonal line as "dynamic and changing". The tilting panel shows how she is "destabilized" (Spiegelman, 2011:182). This technique is used again on page 31 (Fig 28), where Anja is struck with distressing feelings. In the last, tilted panel, she claims, "I just don't want to live" (Spiegelman, 1986:31). The diagonal lines of the panel border and the exaggerated expressions create what McCloud (2006) describes as a sense of intensity. This tilting of panels could be read as Anja's behaviour not lining up with the 'norm' prescribed to her by Psychology.



Figure 27: Art Spiegelman, panels on page 22, *Maus, A Survivor's Tale I: My Father Bleeds History* (1986)



Figure 28: Art Spiegelman, panels on page 31, *Maus, A Survivor's Tale I: My Father Bleeds History* (1986)

There is a scene where Leah Onnerback's lecturer tries to comfort Leah by telling her that her essay was good and that she belongs at Formic University. However, this does not comfort Leah because of the many situations in which she finds herself where this does not seem to be the case. Throughout the graphic novel, we find instances where Leah does not seem to fit in. She gets stuck because she literally cannot fit through the library turnstile (Fig 29). The university, instead of making the turnstile wider to accommodate insects who do not have the slender physique of ants, merely puts up a sign telling "wide-bodied insects to pass through the turnstile sideways" (Solomon, 2019:40). When she loses her cool in administration she uses smoking to calm herself down. Smoking has a bad reputation in society but is at the same time one of the only available coping mechanisms to many dealing with distress⁹.

⁹ The self-medication hypothesis suggests that the use (and often proceeding addiction to) substances, such as nicotine, is an attempt to alleviate suffering. According to Khantzian (2003:47), "[a]ddictive vulnerability is intimately tied to human psychological distress".

However, in trying to cope, Leah takes up a habit that is seen as deviant. Societal and governmental rules dictate that Leah may not stay inside to smoke. She must go outside. Thus, in adopting the habit of smoking, she literally becomes an outsider. It must be noted that it is not impossible or difficult for her thoughts and behaviour to be in the comic. If one were to view the comic as the space in which characters exist, they still exist even if outside of the box. It suggests that there is nothing that does not belong. Perhaps there is something intrinsically ‘different’ about Leah that will never fit in unless our perception of ‘normal’ begins to broaden.



Figure 29: Tayla Shan Solomon, panel on page 39, *The Adventures of A-Bug!* (2019)

2.2 Laughing in the face of adversity: the effects of humour as a framing strategy for distress

The field of Psychology is founded on rationality and empiricism. According to Weiten (2013:38), “[a]s scientists, psychologists assume that behaviour is governed by discernible laws or principles”. However, in 1998, Cotton summarised psychologist Ian John’s thirteen years of critique of this “scientist-practitioner model”, stating: “[i]t is now indisputable that psychologists’ traditional reliance on a narrow empiricist view of science has excessively constrained psychological discourse” (Cotton, 1998:31). This scientist-practitioner model may be viewed as a framework for understanding in that “[i]t can be suggested that the naming, organizing and categorizing of information, places and people is a form of cognitive framing.” (Baasch, 2012:15). Humour can be viewed as an alternative way of framing mental distress in that it may entail a “cognitive-affective shift” (Erickson & Feldstein, 2007:257) and “operate[s] unconsciously through the alteration of one’s perception of internal and external reality”

(Erickson & Feldstein, 2007:258). Critchley (2002:102, emphasis in original) concurs, describing humour as a “profoundly *cognitive* relation to oneself and the world”.

In *The Adventures of A-Bug!* (2019) Leah visits the Equilibrium Centre – a parallel to a university counselling centre. In this scene, humour is used to critique the diagnostics practice of contemporary Psychology. The counsellor refers to a confusing number of sheets (Figs 30 and 31) referencing the detailed, categorised and complicated Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM)¹⁰, that involves much cross-referencing and very little personal interaction. The counsellor’s notes are meagre compared to the amount of information contained in the Diagnostics Procedures sheet and the symptoms checklist, yet the counsellor provides a diagnosis in the first session. The diagnoses made visible in the graphic novel and the checklist of symptoms ridicules the idea of boxing experiences of distress as one singular ‘disease’ under “the assumption that emotional problems stem from illnesses that can be diagnosed and treated just like any other physical illness” (Kinderman, 2014:xxiv). The diagnosis and symptoms in the graphic novel seem perfectly understandable if applied to ants, but when they are applied to Leah, they seem absurd as beetles just do not have the same capabilities as ants. This highlights the fact that experiences of distress are affected by “the many, variable potentials produced by our nature as living, organic beings” (Cromby, Harper & Reavey, 2013:9). One can argue that Leah’s symptoms should be addressed in the context of her life and ways of being as a beetle.

¹⁰ According to Weiten (2013), the DSM was first compiled in 1952 by the American Psychiatric Association. At this time, it classified around 100 mental disorders. Since its conception, it has been continually revised in an attempt to keep up with new research and provide consistency to the diagnosis of mental disorders.



LOOKED AT HIS LIST OF DIAGNOSES...

OPTION 1: Emotional
Patient displays a wide range of emotions that have no relation to situation at hand and appear without the patient's for-knowledge.

OPTION 2: Frail limb disorder
Patient cannot lift more than their own body weight. Should engage in food collection in rough terrain and perform weight lifts two to three times a week.

OPTION 3: Diurnal somnia
Patient does not sleep well at night. Struggle to stay awake during the day. Should take sleeping pills before bed and engage in rigorous physical activity during the day to tire them out and induce nocturnal sleep cycles.

OPTION 4: Anti-social disorder
Patient does not communicate well with other members of the hive. Patient has strong urges to be left alone. Patient does not

IN HIS LIST OF WAYS TO DIAGNOSE...

Pick whichever one matches up with the most number of symptoms.

These are the most common. Is one of these?

<p>OPTION 1: Emotional</p> <p>Patient has sudden bursts of emotion ranging from discomfort to excitement to unhappiness. Patient does not see a problem with having emotions. Patient should practice repressing them.</p> <p>OPTION 2: Frail limb disorder</p> <p>Patient cannot lift more than their own body weight. Patient cannot engage in structural formations with other members of the colony. Patient should perform weight lifting and walking in rough terrain 3 to 4 times a week.</p>	<p>OPTION 1: Beetlism</p> <p>OPTION 2: Nocturnalism</p> <p>OPTION 3: Post-metamorphosis dismorphia</p> <p>OPTION 4: Laziness</p> <p>OPTION 5: Carnivorism</p>
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LEAH'S CHECK-MARKED LIST OF SYMPTOMS.

DIAGNOSTIC PROCEDURES

What are your symptoms?
Students use the FU Equilibrium Centre at their own risk

- Unknown
- Cannot fly straight
- Weak limbs
- Often do nothing for fun
- Want to fly instead of walk
- Does not fly straight
- Obsessed with eating heads
- Becoming violent when threatened and stinging others
- Jittery
- Constantly attempting to fly to sun, often resulting in concussion
- Sleeping during the day
- No desire for teamwork
- Desire to sleep in trees
- Struggling to keep up with workload
- Lack of enjoyment in work
- Cannot pick up pheromones
- Does not like sugar
- Awkward leg to body ratio
- Buzzing wings
- Mating more than once and is not the queen
- Falls over often
- Does not enjoy being busy
- Running slowly
- Living alone
- Reads very fast
- Can see everything around them without moving head
- Gets stuck on back
- Tired
- Frustrated with the system
- Uncontrollable desire to collect excrement from large animals and roll it around
- Desire to swim
- Losing balance often
- Making loud noises
- Drugs

...PLUS HIS NOTES.

WELL, FROM WHAT I CAN TELL --

Figure 30: Tayla Shan Solomon, page 27, *The Adventures of A-Bug!* (2019)



Figure 31: Tayla Shan Solomon, page 28, *The Adventures of A-Bug!* (2019)

In figure 31, it is evident that even the counsellor himself struggles to make sense of all the different categories and his overt positivity suggests that he is not being entirely honest about his confidence. The character is a grasshopper which is one of the most difficult insects to anthropomorphise due to their backward bending hind legs and very short front legs. I decided to represent the counsellor as a grasshopper because the contrast to humans resonates with Kinderman's (2014:14) concern that the current diagnostic systems are "lacking in humanity". The grasshopper's short front legs render him as somewhat silly. This shifts the idea that Psychology, being framed as scientific, is irrefutable and highlights the limitations in our knowledge and understanding of the psyche.

In contrast to the rigidity and order that is found in psychological diagnostics practice, Brosh's *Hyperbole and a Half* (2013) highlights the absurdity and variability of mental distress through humour. Critchely (2002) notes that humour may be brought about through a sense of incongruity. The experience of mental distress is often difficult to explain. This may stem from the perceived illogicality of it and inability to pin it down. Brosh's presentation of being sent into a fit of laughter in the middle of one of her bouts of "floor-crying" (Brosh, 2013:np) by a "tiny, shrivelled piece of corn under the refrigerator" (Brosh, 2013:np) may highlight this aspect of such an experience. Brosh (2013) expresses her lack of understanding and her worries of trying to explain why the "tiny, unimportant piece of corn", that was "so alone", "just sitting there!" became so funny. Brosh hyperbolises the story as a way of creating humour, but in the retelling of the story, as much as she stresses that there is no logical reason for the experience, she hypothesises various reasons nonetheless. This cognitive process is represented in the nonsensical diagrams she draws up (Fig 32). The diagrams are presented as a logical, even mathematical approach to understanding an experience that makes no sense at all. The handwritten nonsensical explanation with the crude drawings and squiggly arrows ridicules an attempt to explain this experience scientifically. Brosh (2013:np) ends the chapter by finding some sense of meaning in the experience regardless, saying, "even if everything still seems like hopeless bullshit, maybe it's just pointless bullshit or weird bullshit or possibly not even bullshit".

Corn + floor = Cloorn?
[Carry the f], multiply by how
alone the corn is, perform
a twisting maneuver
generate laughter

Laughter happens.
it is a surprise.

The element of surprise
allows the laughter to
circle back on itself

→ CREATES
INFINITE
LAUGHTER LOOP, →

Figure 32: Allie Brosh, panels from *Hyperbole and a Half* (2013)

This suggests that humour may offer up perspectives on experiences of distress that do not rely on diagnostics or explanation, but are still helpful to the person experiencing it. Critchley (2002:15) suggests that humour may serve a “therapeutic as well as a critical function”. The tendency to use humour to address mental distress and its relation to cognition may support Kinderman’s (2014) theory that mental distress may be addressed through reconfiguring maladaptive mental models.

2.3. What’s the Story? Narrative as a framing device

A key aspect of perspectives of psychology that are alternative to the disease model is that individuals, and therefore experiences, are entirely unique. Kinderman (2014:xxiv) states that “[d]ifferences between people’s learning experiences will result in different ways of understanding the world, and hence create differences between people”. Furthermore, Cromby, Harper & Reavey (2013:9) highlight that every experience of distress is unique in that it is “bound up with social and material conditions, personal biographies, life events, and relationships”. Narratives are able to frame mental distress as an experience as opposed to a disease. Just as the images surrounding each other in comics give context to one another, narratives provide context for experience revealing it to be “a complicated, heterogeneous phenomenon with multiple origins” (Cromby, Harper & Reavey, 2013:100). Personal narratives of distress frame distress as something that happens in an environment. In order to understand an experience of distress the context must be taken into account. This may allow for a more complex understanding of the experience even if one has not had a similar experience.

There is a rich body of work that acknowledges the role of narrative in learning. Clarissa Pinkola Estes (1992:17) is a psychoanalyst and “cantadora, keeper of the old stories” who uses narratives to analogise and provide understandings of women’s psyches. Stories are thus seen as powerful tools, with storytellers such as Toni Morrison (1993:323) describing narrative as “radical, creating us at the very moment it is being created”. Estes’ use of stories to teach is affirmed by Morrison’s (1993:318) claim that narratives are “one of the principal ways in which we absorb knowledge”.

I would argue that learning in itself is necessarily followed by a shift in perspective, no matter how small, taking in the new information to broaden one’s understanding of a subject. According to Baasch (2012:15): “As human beings we are constantly situated within multiple

frameworks, these frames are spatial as well as psychological and directly inform the way in which we comprehend the world”. Narratives of distress may aid in shifting the dominant perspectives on mental health. According to McCloud (2000:38):

[A] truly honest account of everyday life, in fiction or nonfiction, can serve a social and political purpose as it helps to counteract the distorted images of society continually fed to us by mass media[...] especially if the lives portrayed are not the beneficiaries of society’s status quo.

Moss-Wellington (2017:22), in his thesis on Humanist Narratology, argues for the use of stories to “complicate our conception of others” as one way of engendering empathy. This empathy, in line with recognising the idiosyncratic nature of experience, requires imagination. The extensive use of metaphor to describe experiences of mental distress is a testament to this theory. According to Boyd (2009:176 in Moss-Wellington, 2017:22), narrative contributes towards one’s ability to view something from different perspectives, which “aids the evolution of cooperation” and “the growth of human mental flexibility”.

As discussed earlier, the visual clues in *I Kill Giants* (2011) allow one to speculate that Barbara’s experience may be worsened by her having already experienced loss. In *The Adventures of A-Bug!* (2019) Leah’s Equilibrium Counsellor pins Leah’s distress to the idea that she is “unbalanced” (Solomon, 2019:28). However, Leah’s struggles to deal with administration, meet deadlines and cope with the Void cannot simply be put down to being unbalanced. In fact, only once in the novel is Leah actually seen being inhibited by being stuck on her back¹¹. There are other factors that contribute to her distress, mainly stemming from the fact that the university is designed for ants. She faces lecturers lacking in empathy, administration systems that are difficult to navigate, facilities that do not accommodate her body, and poorly managed counselling facilities. All of this, coupled with getting stuck on her back (which also leads to fatigue), can be understood as contributing to her experience of distress. The narrative of *The Adventures of A-Bug!* (2019) makes this evident.

According to Chute (2011:109), “Comics can express life stories, especially traumatic ones, powerfully because it makes literal the presence of the past by disrupting spatial and temporal conventions to overlay or palimpsest past and present”. This is seen in *Maus* (1986), where Spiegelman inserts a comic he made years before he began collecting his father’s memoirs. The comic, titled “Prisoner on the Hell Planet”, describes Spiegelman’s experience just after his mother committed suicide. The strained relationship between Art and his father is

¹¹ This is a scene where Themba essentially kidnaps her: she is unable to stop him because she is stuck on her back.

given some context through this inclusion of a second graphic narrative. Not only does it cause his father to be upset when he finds it, but its inclusion is evident of how “[d]eath haunts Art and interferes with his peace of mind” (Thormann, 2002:131) – so much so that this past experience interrupts the narrative, like a jarring flashback. The visual style of “Prisoner on the Hell Planet” contrasts starkly with the style of *Maus* (1986) (Figs 33 and 34). It does not follow the format of anthropomorphism that *Maus* (1986) does. Instead, it depicts human with contorted faces set against dark backgrounds. The harsh, thick lines evoke the medium of woodcut known for its use in Expressionism. This style, known for its depiction of pain, also calls to mind the nature of his mother’s death - referenced by an arm, with a tattooed serial number, holding a blade to the wrist of the other arm. “Prisoner on the Hell Planet” disrupts the flow of the narrative in *Maus* (1986), as such “registering confrontationally - and materially - the presence of the past” (Chute, 2006:206-207), and complicating our ideas of the father-son relationship.



Figure 33: Art Spiegelman, panels on page 99, *Maus, A Survivor's Tale I: My Father Bleeds History* (1986)

THE NEXT WEEK WE SPENT IN MOURNING... MY FATHER'S FRIENDS ALL OFFERED ME HOSTILITY MIXED IN WITH THEIR CONDOLENCES...



...BUT, FOR THE MOST PART, I WAS LEFT ALONE WITH MY THOUGHTS...



I REMEMBERED THE LAST TIME I SAW HER...



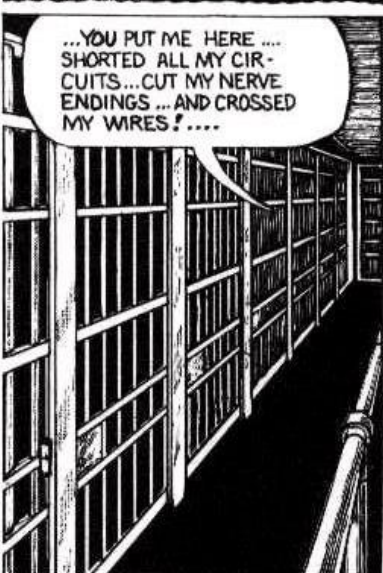
SHE CAME INTO MY ROOM... IT WAS LATE AT NIGHT...



...I TURNED AWAY, RESENTFUL OF THE WAY SHE TIGHTENED THE UMBILICAL CORD...



WELL, MOM, IF YOU'RE LISTENING...



© Art Spiegelman, 1972

Figure 34: Art Spiegelman, panels on page 103, *Maus, A Survivor's Tale I: My Father Bleeds History* (1986)

Thus, stories provide a means of expressing a perspective and a way of helping others to view this perspective and learn to understand others and their experiences. The imagination required for the consumption of narratives may help to foster more empathetic views of mental health. In what Moss-Wellington (2017:23) terms “[h]umanistic narrative” a multiplicity of perspectives can be established “without needing to concoct an inferior opposite which they will be judged against”. The telling of a story of distress can also serve as a perspective shifting or teaching tool for the author themselves. Conceptualised as “narrative medicine”, stories can generate “new insights into the personal experience of illness” (Green & Myers, 2010:574 in Farthing & Priego, 2016:2).

2.4. Conclusion

Framing is an important aspect of shifting dominant perspectives on mental health. Frames can be multiple and thus allow multiple viewpoints to be engaged in. The way that the current societal frameworks function in the controlling of behaviour has been made visible in comics through a metaphorical reading of the panel frame. However, comics such as those explored offer up alternative perspectives that remind us of the heterogeneity of experience. Humour can be an effective means of opening up alternative perspectives on issues, as one is able to expose the absurdities found in experiences of mental distress as well as the practices surrounding it. Moss-Wellington (2017:56) summarises the potential effects of humorous framing and explains: “We upset narratives of causality, predictable spatiality and temporality, to draw attention to our perceptual limitations, experiential limitations, tendency to monocausality and empiricism; in sum, how little we know”. However, the primary means of communication in comics, narrative, has been proven able to expand what we know about the experience of distress in its contextualisation of experience and its encouragement of creative empathy.

Conclusion

The comics medium is growing in use and consumption. Comics have long been ignored in the academic realm, but I believe that there needs to be more engagement with this dynamic medium. Comics can be used to encourage understanding and may provide a source of comfort for those who are struggling in allowing them to feel understood. Stories have long been used to teach and so it stands to reason that a narrative medium such as comics can contribute towards the education of the general public about mental distress. This medium could be a vital tool for promoting a better understanding of psychology and for critiquing misguided views on psychology. The field of Psychology is not flawless and some of the concepts it promotes can be harmful to individuals. The idea that each experience is idiosyncratic suggests that Psychology could benefit from the creation of and engagement in multiple perspectives on mental health. The processes of creating, reading and engaging with comics encourage the extensive use of creativity and imagination. The ideas and perspectives of the author can be made clear through this medium and thus I would argue that it is an incredibly powerful tool for the promotion of creative empathy.

In this mini-thesis I have explored the many strategies and techniques that artists employ in creating comics that provide complex representations of people and their experiences. The use of symbolism promotes interpretations that are subjective and meaningful to the reader. This provides motivation for engagement. The choice of colours, signifiers and style enables artists to create characters that have rich personalities and can show intense emotions. This enables readers to identify with those characters and better understand what their experiences may be like. These experiences are complicated further through the way they are framed. The comics medium contains actual frames that can be skewed or disrupted. This highlights the act of framing and may encourage more critical approaches to subject matter surrounding mental distress. The narratives of comics frame distress as an experience that should not be taken out of context. This supports Cromby (2015) and Kinderman's (2014) understanding of distress as something that is affected by a multitude of factors, such as one's body, environment, past experiences and soul.

The act of reading comics has been shown to be a profoundly cognitive experience. It engages both linguistic and visual communication skills. The act of closure is a unique cognitive process of connecting images and words in context to garner meaning. The use of humour has also been shown to be a cognitive process that is often used in comics. In this way the tendency to use humour in describing experiences of mental distress may be founded

in that it is able to shift one's way of thinking. Moreover, a humorous approach to painful subject matter can make the experience of engaging with it more appealing. It could encourage more people to engage in positive, uplifting conversations about mental health for example. Furthermore, the use of imagination is imperative in beginning to understand the experience of another. Through investing in a story and deciphering how someone or something that is vastly different to oneself may feel, one can begin to strengthen one's ability to use creativity to empathise with those who are different to oneself. If one is able to feel bad for a Christmas beetle, how much easier would it be to sympathise with another human who is suffering?

This graphic novel has been a struggle and a mercy. I came out of my first bout of depression determined to never go there again... and hating myself every time I did. I thought it was something I could escape, but the threat remained and I thought it was my fault. But I began to imagine myself as something else. Leah is me, and she is not me. I love Leah. I see her struggles and I only have encouraging words for her. I know that depression is something that may never leave forever and all I can do is learn to live with it. I would not blame Leah for her struggles and I could certainly never hate her. Through the process of creating this graphic novel I have learnt a lot. I do not (always) hate myself (as much) anymore and I am no longer scared of depression. I now know that when I fall it will hurt, but there are bandages and I will heal and I can get back up.

Epilogue

Leah didn't tell her parents that she was struggling with getting stuck on her back. She thought that they might not understand. She knew that getting stuck on her back could be hereditary. She didn't like that thought, because that meant that the rest of her family just took it in their stride. Leah didn't even know what a stride felt like. She didn't know how to walk without hesitating. And so, she felt ashamed. For not being as strong or as brave as everyone else.

If they didn't share the same struggles as her, then the threat of them not understanding was still there. She thought they wouldn't understand. She thought they might tell her to try harder or pray harder... but she had been doing sooo much of that. And she couldn't tell whether it was working. She was just so tired. She just wanted to it all to end.

And that - that was the worst part of it all. She couldn't stand the idea of telling her parents that this beautiful life that they'd given her... she didn't want it anymore. If they didn't understand it might break their hearts. She couldn't do that to them.

So Leah didn't tell her parents.

I don't want anyone to ever be in this position - where they don't tell someone that they're struggling because of the threat of them not understanding. But this happens every single day. You can't possibly understand exactly what someone else is going through, but you can try. So for those who are struggling, I hope you have the courage to tell whoever it is that you need to tell. And I hope for the person who is listening, that they will have the courage to try to understand.

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