

Out of Hours

Graphic medicine: humanity in cartoon rats



Richard Mosse, Wrap Your Troubles In Dreams, 2012. Digital c-print. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

A young girl wraps her arms in her clothes to keep warm in the early dawn at Busurungi, Walikale, North Kivu. This girl's family and neighbours lost hundreds to massacres carried out by the FDLR (Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda) in 2006 and 2009.

constructed schools that collapsed during the Sichuan earthquake in 2008 killing 5335 children. The rods are laid out meticulously to create an iron landscape, portraying a great sense of calm, in contrast to the tragedy that they were witness to. In 2011 Weiwei was imprisoned for 81 days. He is prevented from talking about this time, but has recreated key moments in his everyday life within tomb-like casks in a deconsecrated church. With 'S.A.C.R.E.D' we become the observers, watching him being constantly watched by his guards, 24 hours a day. A few days in Venice can really allow you the opportunity to explore and be confronted with current and important issues in the most unexpected ways.

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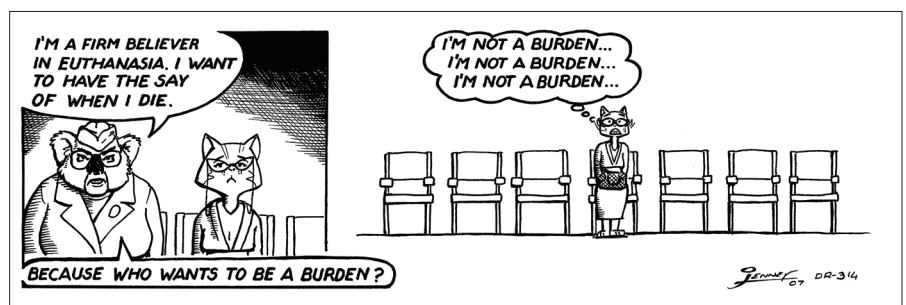
If your view of cartoons and comics doesn't extend beyond the *The Beano*, *The Dandy*, and *2000AD* then you may not have realised the potential for a cartoon rat to change how you feel about medicine. Comics have their own unique qualities and can portray a revealing medical narrative that is just as valid as any other literature or artwork. They are accessible, engaging, and the best examples offer rare insight into the human condition.

The main character in the *Doc Rat* strips is Dr Benjamin Rat, a hard-pressed Australian GP working long hours, fighting the red tape in which general practice is swathed, while trying to be the best doctor he can. Not too outlandish a scenario many will feel. There is a cast of anthropomorphic animals that includes Gizelle Thompson, a fiercely loyal gazelle receptionist, and Mary Scamper, the rabbit nurse. The strips are drawn by Jenner, the pen name for Craig Hilton, himself a GP in Melbourne, and a Fellow of the Royal Australian College of General Practitioners.

While some of the cartoons created by Jenner use simple puns for humour many of the strips form part of a wider narrative arc. Graphic medicine is a term coined by Ian Williams, a GP and comics artist, who produces his own work under the pseudonym, Thom Ferrier. There has been an annual Graphic Medicine conference since 2010 and their aim is to 'explore the interaction between the medium of comics and the discourse of health care'. There are over 60 graphic novels relevant to healthcare studies listed at the Graphic Medicine website (www.graphicmedicine.org). Williams has highlighted how some comics will use infographics set alongside the medical narrative and they blur the traditional distinctions between textbook, novel, and autobiography.¹

One example, currently freely available online (<http://blog.e2w-illustration.com>)

Doc Rat, by Jenner. <http://www.docrat.com.au/>



is *Look Straight Ahead*, a graphic novel about a teenage boy and his struggle with bipolar disorder. It details the experiences and delusions of Jeremy as he despairs and unravels. Similarly, the comic strips of Matilda Tristram as she coped, aged 31, with colon cancer while pregnant, are revealing and humorous in a way that few articles could achieve. Ian Williams draws attention to a pair of books that exemplify the potential of graphic medicine. *Mom's Cancer* by Brian Fies documents with great sensitivity the author's mother's experience of metastatic lung cancer and *Monsters* by Ken Dahl, takes on the unpromising subject of herpes, and is described by Williams as a first-rate tragicomic graphic novel. Both are remarkable resources for patients and doctors alike.

At their simplest, cartoons can provide a wry look at our work and offer a moment of respite in a busy day. Yet when considered in the field of medical humanities, graphic medicine has much more to offer than a cheap gag. Comics have something of the anarchic about them; a healthy disrespect for political correctness in their own counter-culture. They can be rude, occasionally filthy, and explicit in forms that simply don't translate to prose. They can also be educational and deeply moving. Unsurprisingly, given those qualities, they seem to be particularly effective when portraying the subjective experiences of the authors and their illnesses.

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1. Williams ICM. Graphic medicine: comics as medical narrative. *Med Humanities* 2012; **38**: 21-27. DOI:10.1136/medhum-2011-010093.