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BOOK REVIEW


Founded by Ian Williams, a British physician and comics artist, graphic medicine is an emerging area of an interdisciplinary field which explores comics’ distinctive engagement with and performance of illness experience. Published by the Penn State University Press and curated by artists and non-artists alike, *Graphic Medicine Manifesto* is an inaugural volume in its series on graphic medicine which brings together wide-ranging perspectives on graphic pathographies. While as a typical manifesto, the book establishes principles and objectives of graphic medicine, it also transcends in that it attests to the transformative power of graphic medicine; deliberates the diverse pedagogical uses of graphic pathographies; and, finally, testifies to the interdisciplinary prospects of the field. Divided into six chapters, each essay begins with the writer’s personal engagement with comics, then proceeds to examine graphic pathographies from diverse theoretical perspectives and wraps up with excerpts/whole comics sourced from various graphic narratives.

In the spirit of comics, the inaugural section titled ‘Welcome to the Graphic Medicine Manifesto’ by way of cartoons introduces its contributors and also offers multiple definitions of the field. Accordingly, if Susan Squier, a professor of Women’s Studies, defines graphic medicine as narratives that ‘challenge the dominant methods of scholarship in healthcare’ (p. 2), then Michael J. Green, a physician and educator at Penn State College of Medicine, characterises graphic medicine as ‘an approach to the education of health professionals’ (p. 1). Although these definitions like any exercise in defining a term risks rigid closure, what emerges here is perspectival richness, interdisciplinary possibilities and, implicitly, the future opportunities of graphic medicine itself.

Chapter 1, titled ‘Who gets to speak? The making of comics scholarship’, by Scott T. Smith, displays a keen historical awareness by surveying the recent and past scholarship (both within and without academy) on comics as it intends to expose the lacunae in comics scholarship. Although Smith affirms the burgeoning sophistication of the comics medium and the changing status of comics studies as a legitimate discourse within the academy, the author quarrels with the artists and non-artists alike, who for so long have obsessively searched for an all-inclusive definition of comics and compulsively defended the comics medium. These two impulses have bedevilled comics research and, therefore, according to Smith, are ‘unnecessary and counterproductive’ (p. 35). Instead the author urges the practitioners of comics criticism for ‘an open discourse’, which will reflect ‘the range, energy, and innovation of its subject’ (p. 35).

The next three essays form a narrative arc in that they are framed by the theme of the uses of graphic medicine both in the class and in the clinic. The first essay in this cluster titled ‘The uses of graphic medicine for engaged scholarship’ by Susan Merrill Squier establishes the relevance of graphic pathographies to ‘fields of engaged scholarship’ beyond institutional medicine (p. 43). Demonstrating the bearing of graphic medicine in social, political and environmental issues, Squier uncovers the ‘real-world commitment’
and ‘the rich role of comics’ in teaching. If Squier explores the social mores of graphic medicine, then in the second essay, by Michael J. Green titled ‘Graphic storytelling and medical narrative’, demonstrates the use of comics in medical curriculum. Motivated by a passion to merge arts and science, Green introduces comics in medical education and develops ‘the first-ever course on comics and medicine for medical students’ (p. 69) at Hershey Penn State University. To these ends, he not only emphasises reading graphic pathographies, but also discusses the benefits of ‘making comics’ within the medical curriculum. Accordingly, if reading comics improves diagnostic reasoning and doctoring skills, then making comics will enhance creative and communication skills.

The third essay in the narrative arc, titled ‘Graphic pathography in the classroom and the clinic’, by Kimberly R. Myers, provides a personal testimony of the utility of comics through a first-hand account of how Marisa Accocella Marchetto’s Cancer Vixen ‘corresponded’ to her breast cancer experience. The essay is divided into two distinct sections – while the first part of the essay reinforces how comics as a hybrid medium, compared with other media, can deepen narrative competence and analytical skills of the medical students, then the second section is concerned with Myer’s identification with Cancer Vixen and how it helped her navigate her breast cancer identity. Myer’s positive experiences with graphic medicine – both professional and personal – testify to the power of graphic medicine as a valuable resource.

The critical highpoint of the book, as it were, is Ian Williams’s ‘Comics and the iconography of illness’, which examines the representation of disease and suffering in the comics medium and how it in turn constitutes an ‘unofficial’ iconography of medicine. Refracted through the prism of his personal engagement with graphic pathographies, Williams offers taxonomy to understand the figurative art of showing illness in graphic pathographies – viz., the Manifest, the Concealed and the Invisible. While ‘the Manifest’ graphically scripts ‘the signs of illness or scars’, then ‘the Concealed’ is a way of showing ‘the psychological suffering’, which ‘outweighs the physical stigmata’ (p. 119). ‘The Invisible’, which is usually reserved to mental illness conditions, foregrounds the ‘psychological sufferings’ (p. 119).

While the earlier essays waxed eloquently about the capabilities of comics, then ‘The crayon revolution’ by M. K. Czerwiec examines how there has been a systematic stymying of drawing skills. Equating image making to world making, Czerwiec, while reinforcing the benefits of reading comics, also calls attention to the generative and phenomenological capabilities of visual language; that being so, Czerwiec urges the readers to embrace their (lost) visual sensibilities. Rendered in colour, the concluding section of the Manifesto assembles diverse comic authors who acknowledge the potential of comics. Ultimately, Graphic Medicine Manifesto draws its strength from the way the individual voices coalesce to confirm not only the ability of comics to unravel medical culture and the pedagogical possibilities of graphic medicine but the transformative and community-building competence of graphic pathographies. In short, Graphic Medicine Manifesto is an essential read for scholars in comics studies, cultural studies, medical humanities, bicultural studies and visual studies, and to any reader who values the intersection of literature and medicine.

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