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## Alcoholism, Domestic Violence, & Mental Illness: As a Graphic Novel

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# A DAY ON THE BACK FORTY

## Alcoholism and domestic violence as a graphic novel

by Abigail Jackson



### **Thesis Statement**

Domestic violence is an issue that affects more than one in four women and has been known to result in 2 million injuries and 1,300 deaths each year. Fifty-five percent of these cases involved alcohol and forty percent of those abusing alcohol have at least one serious mental illness.

Unfortunately, these are problems that affect many lives and often carry with them a taboo of admitting these issues have affected ones' life. To free myself of this taboo, I would like to tell a personal narrative that illuminates these issues through the form of a graphic novel. I would like to tell this story through more than just language alone and use design to better portray and create an experience that allows for deeper understanding and connectivity to these issues.



The final accordion book and its case



Close up of accordion spreads with the box closed showing the front cover and ribbon attachment which allows easy access to the book when closed.



**Ultimately, my question is:**

Can the format of a graphic novel increase understanding and connectivity to issues regarding domestic violence and alcoholism to create an internal and external environment where these issues lose their taboo and become part of a larger conversation?

## Project Information

My inspiration for this project came from my personal experiences with domestic violence and alcoholism and my interest in not only sharing and hopefully lifting the taboo of having these experiences cast a negative light on my life, but to expose these issues and hopefully bring awareness to those who are not close to domestic violence or alcoholism and to also offer a connection to those who have experienced these issues. My thought process for this project was to be able to create a thought-provoking experience that could be experienced on both an intimate and public level, and for this I chose to use an accordion book format that could be both seen from afar and then encountered on a more personal level when deliberately holding and reading the book up close. I felt that using the format of a graphic novel was an appropriate approach for telling a personal narrative such as mine for many reasons that I will try to sum up here. From my experiences reading books such as *Fun Home*, *Blankets*, *Maus*, those of Sabrina Ward Harrison along with countless others, the addition of imagery to support or even replace language is a huge transcendence from merely reading and imagining a situation to beginning to pick up on a feeling or experience that language alone may have fallen short in doing so.

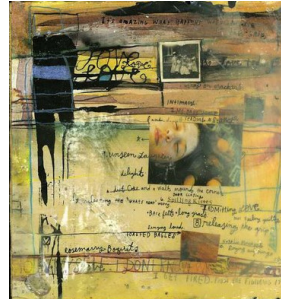
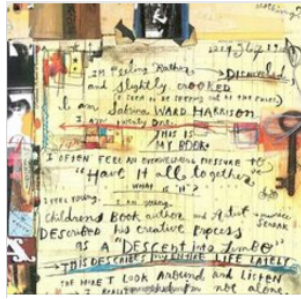
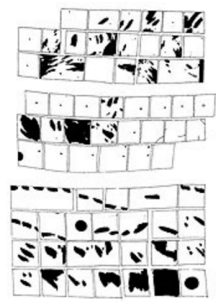
One of the main reasons that I have for telling my story in this format is that I believe that simply discussing or retelling my story does not truly reflect or convey the emotions and experiences I went through. "Novelists have frequently found that the impact of trauma can only adequately be represented by mimicking its forms and symptoms, so that temporality and chronology collapse, and narratives are characterized by repetition and indirection", as explained by Anne Whitehead in *Trauma Fiction*.

As is their typical form, the graphic novel is a tool that is able to transcend time through the use of gutters, isolated pictures, and its ability to tell a fragmented story in a way that is often concurrent with the experience of fragmented memory during a time of trauma. As Scott McCloud explains in *Understanding Comics*: "Comics panels fracture both time and space, offering a jagged, staccato rhythm of unconnected moments". In this way they often mimic the way a traumatic event seems to encode itself into our subconscious as "staccato" thoughts, feelings, and memories, such as described briefly by Judith Herman in her work *Trauma and Recovery*, "traumatic memories lack verbal narrative and context; rather, they are encoded in the form of vivid sensations and images". While purely written or literature can describe trauma, graphic novels can utilize images to emphasize the "frozen and wordless quality of traumatic memories...". In this way, graphic novels are an excellent medium to portray an emotional experience through the informed use of color, repetition, graphic elements, panel size, and various visual clues. These images combined with words may prove to be a more powerful conduit for sharing personal narrative experiences than many others, and in my personal position, I believe it is definitely cohesive for mine.

## Project Goals

My goals for this project are to give anyone who may be going through a similar situation or looking for a connection to these issues another place to turn and to give insight to those who may not yet have these experiences. With this I hope that someone may be inspired to learn more about these issues and if so moved to consider to do something about them themselves.

## Research & Visual Inspiration



## Research & Visual Inspiration, Continued

My research included both visual and written references that I tried to draw inspiration from. The visual+written storytelling abilities of Sabrina Ward Harrison and Adrian Koch are two of the most influential for me as well as countless others. While a lot of this research involved images, it was also important to me to look into other ways of communicating, such as flow of a story or the ability to use metaphors to express a larger idea, since all of my content is self-generated. Some of my favorite research includes the following:

*(In order, left to right)*

### **Watchmen: The Graphic Novel as Trauma Fiction, by Brandy Ball Blake**

“While purely verbal literature can present trauma, graphic novels can utilize images to emphasize the “frozen and wordless quality of traumatic memories...” (Herman 37). Emotional impact, repetition compulsion, states of helplessness, and other symptoms of trauma can all be delivered through visual clues, such as color, panel size, and repetitive imagery. The combination of words and images provide many opportunities for illustrating the impact of traumatic experience.”

### **Spilling Open, The True and the Questions, Brave on the Rocks and various books of Sabrina Ward Harrison**

I have been reading these books since I was a young girl and have been driven and intrigued by them since my first interaction. Although she is not formally trained as a graphic designer her ability to convey an emotion, thought, or experience through type and graphic elements has always captivated me.

### **Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic, by Alison Bechdel**

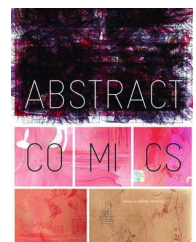
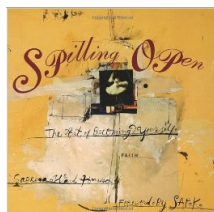
A cult classic graphic novel that utilizes and showcases the graphic novel’s ability to accurately and successfully depict a time, place and create a unique and personal experience for an audience.

### **Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art, by Scott McCloud**

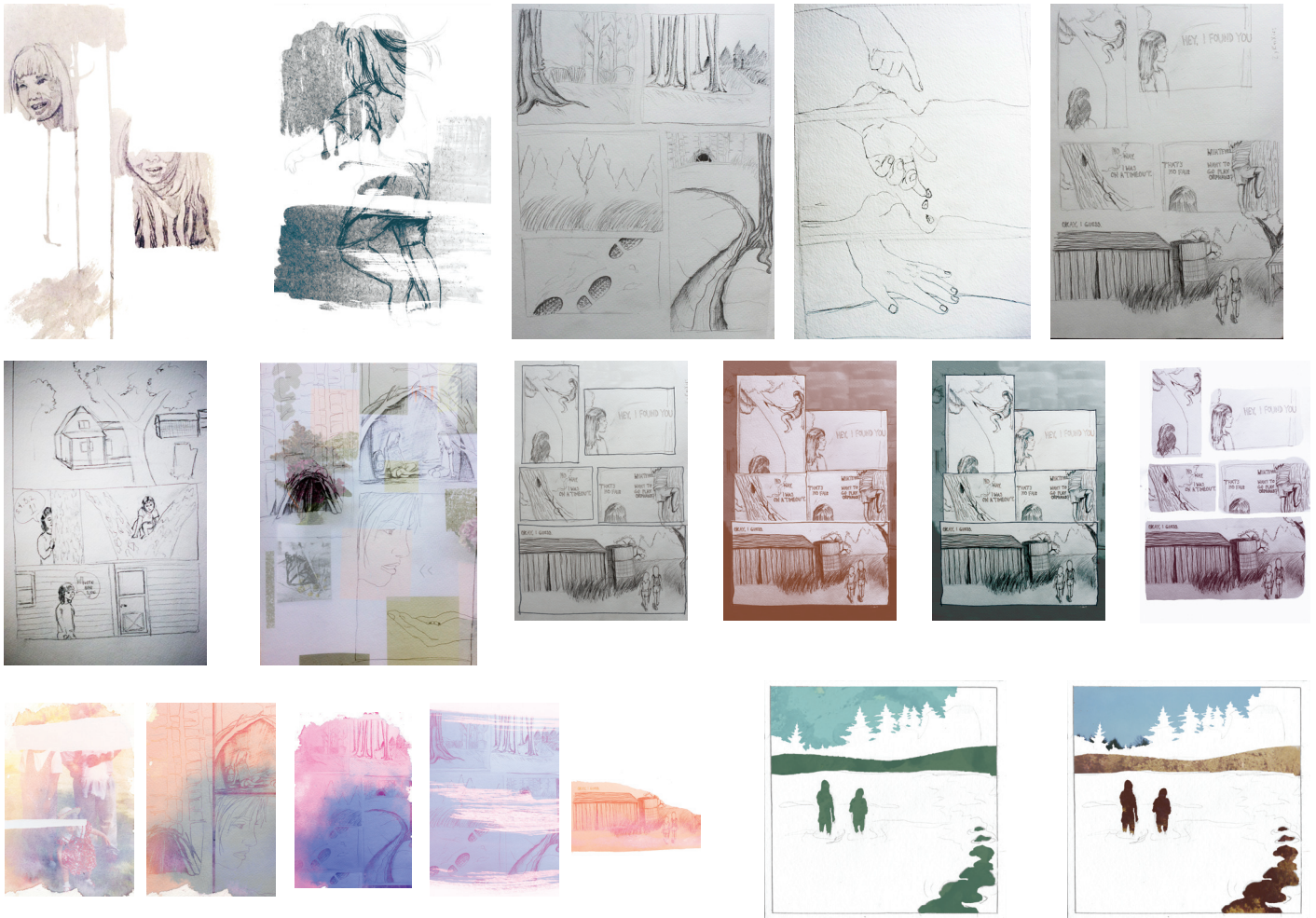
- Definitions, history, and potential.
- Visual Iconography and its Effects.
- Closure, reader participation between the panels.
- Word-picture dynamics.
- Time and motion.
- The psychology of line styles and color.
- Comics and the artistic process.

### **Abstract Comics: The Anthology, by Andrei Molotiu**

“a novel that devoted to non-representational comics presenting aesthetically rich, graphically bold, surprisingly affecting work from masters such as Crumb, Panter & Moscoso alongside lesser-known pioneers.” This book offers a wealth of visual information that proves that shape, structure, color, and line do not need to be literal representations to express to a reader a story, emotion or experience.



## Sketches



## Final direction

The direction I thought would work best for my concept was one that utilized both photos from my past as well as thoughtfully composed panels with rough illustrations. I ended up using a straight pencil marked gutter line to differentiate the story panels from that of the narration panels and keep those elements simple to give the story room to stay the main focus. Color was then used to express the changing atmosphere of actions and environment from a positive to a negative through a carefully chosen gradation that could also elude to the setting itself which takes place in a very rural and natural area.



Apart from the visual elements I needed to come up with a type system that could help to tell my story in a fluid and sensible way. I decided to go with hand-rendered type for the dialogue between characters to stay consistent with the figures illustrated aesthetic and juxtapose that with digitally set type on the narrative panels. The digital type is set in Univers LT Std 45 Light and is continued onto the inside panel of the box which gives a statistical and wider lens to the issues addressed in order to express and show contrast to the personal story that is one of many many others.

girls!  
lunch time!

IM LEAVING  
YOU CRAZY FUCKING  
BITCH.  
GIRLS!  
GET IN THE  
CAR!

dads  
home!

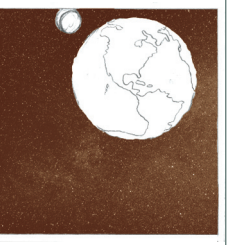
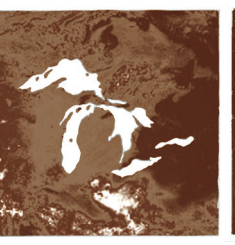
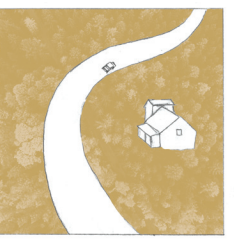
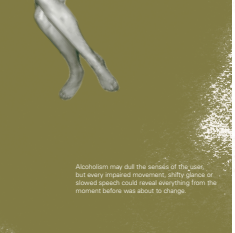
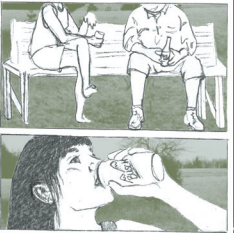
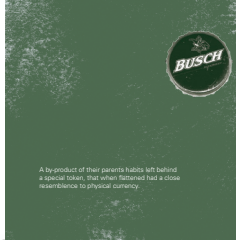
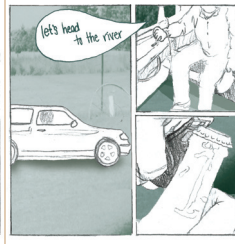
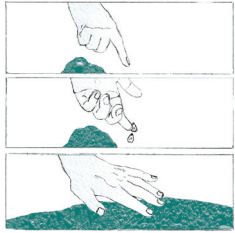


## Conclusion

Overall I feel that A Day on the Back Forty was a successful final exploration of my thesis concept and serves its purpose of using design to convey an experience through visualizing a personal narrative and allows its audience access to a story they may otherwise have little knowledge or experience with. As a project that I have been interested in working on for much of my life, I am happy with this as my BFA thesis project, but look forward to adding on to it and refining it to its full potential.



# A DAY ON THE BACK FORTY



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