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RESEARCH

The Practice of Authentication: Adapting *Pilgrimage from Nenthead* into a Graphic Memoir

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Autobiographical comics have a more conflicted relationship with the truth than explicitly fictional work, due in part to the constraint to fidelity but complicated further by producer-orientated methods of authentication. Every graphic work has a unique expressive style, a transformation through eye and hand which foregrounds the artist's vision, underscoring the process of mediation and subjectivity in interpretation. The structural and visual modality of the comic-book form does not allow for a representational facsimile of the world, involving as it does elements of story compression, visual abstraction and duality in the rendering of text and image. This paper will focus on current doctoral research investigating the graphic memoir, in particular; the authenticating role of the comic-book practitioner in regard to the representation and memorialization of the past and the indexical reference to real-world events and locations. This line of enquiry will be explored via current studio-based practice involving the initial preparation and treatment of a graphic adaptation of *Pilgrimage from Nenthead*, a working-class memoir written by Chester Armstrong (published by Methuen in 1938).

Keywords: Authentication; adaptation; fidelity; graphic memoir; practice

To describe a memoir work as 'authentic' is to suggest that the narrative content and/or method of construction is genuinely expressed or has a transparent relation to actual lived experience, and that the author has set about the task of creation with integrity and honesty. In consideration of the graphic memoir text, this definition encourages a more holistic "appraisal of correctness" (De Sousa, 2007: 323), including matters of style and narrativization, and not solely a judgment on matters of factual accuracy. Authentication is a useful concept here as it suggests a mix of

technical and ideological approaches to the task in hand, connoting the act of construction and design (the artistic means by which truth is validated), as well as the authorial perspective or the "consciousness through which the narrative is filtered" (Kunka, 2018: 61).

The chief aim of this paper is to interrogate the 'performed' authenticating role of the comic-book artist, in regard to the preparation and construction of memoir materials into a long-form comic-book (see El Refaie, 2012: 135–178). This practice-led investigation relates to my current doctoral project *The Checkweighman*, the graphic adaptation of *Pilgrimage From Nenthead*, a literary memoir written by my great-grandfather Chester Armstrong. This paper will explore the ways in which creators such as Art Spiegelman, Alison Bechdel, Bryan and Mary Talbot, to name but a few, act out or depict the authentic-self (as author of the story and/or as drawn persona in the story) and embed visual cues (codified signifiers of truthfulness) within the graphic text. In order to certify their version of narrative events, graphic memoirists adopt a range of authentication strategies and markers, including the insertion of: fact-based or historical text (used to contextualise or endorse the narration of events), pictorial referents of 'realness' (period detail, photographs, maps, diagrams and so on) and self-reflexive or confessional sequences. It is also pertinent to consider how the page modality and visual style of the artwork convey emotional credence and narrational intent – authentication through the plane of expression, or 'graphiation' (Marion, 1993, cited in Mikkonen, 2017: 86). Critical and strategic approaches to authentication will be examined, through a reflexive approach to the on-going adaptive process which, at the time of writing, is still at a formative stage. I have included here, as discussion points, several proto-page layouts which were recently shown at the *Creating Comics/Creative Comics* symposium at the University of South Wales (Dodds 2018).

Chester Armstrong was in his late sixties, a retired checkweighman from Ashington Colliery (Northumberland) when he wrote *Pilgrimage From Nenthead*. The book is cited as an example of working-class memoir in various academic accounts on class or labour history, for example; Jonathan Rose's *The Intellectual Life of the British Working Classes* (Rose, 2010: 73–75). The early chapters of *Pilgrimage* recount

Chester's early upbringing in the lead-mining town of Nenthead, situated in a remote and rural part of East-Cumberland and idealized in the text as an "object lesson in the study of social politics" (Armstrong, 1938: 10). The family migrates to the North East for economic and health reasons, and the upheaval is obviously a palpable shock to a thirteen-year-old Chester. Despite initial misgivings, and dire warnings from the community back in Nenthead that colliers should be feared as a "tribe of barbarians" (Armstrong, 1938: 55), Chester adjusts to his new surroundings with a stoic fatalism. Along with his father and two elder brothers he soon commences his working life for Ashington Coal Company.

There are several key strands to the *Pilgrimage* text. As social history, the book deals with the rapid expansion of Ashington as a colliery town in the late 1890's as well as the habitual aspects of community life and the vibrancy of local associations. There are frequent references in Chester's memoir to the political environment, the incubation of socialist ideals within the Northumberland mining community and in particular, the emergence of an Independent Labour Party as a galvanizing force for the working class (see Armstrong, 1938: 67–72). The latter needs to be seen in the broader context of a privatized British mining industry in the mid to late 19th century – a piecemeal industry lacking in sophisticated mechanization, in the hands of the landed gentry and run by shareholders or partners of numerous coal companies, of which the Ashington Coal Company was just one of many (Pollard, 1984: 11/12).

Tellingly though, there is scant reference in Chester's memoir to the working routine or indeed the quotidian life of the miner in general. Instead, from the midpoint on, the reader is presented with a detailed self-examination of the inner life of the mind and the impulse towards autodidacticism. One of the pivotal episodes of the book (signaled in the title) deals with Chester's rationalization and renouncing of the Primitive Methodist doctrine of his youth, to be replaced by the earthly enlightenment to be found in modernist literature and sociopolitical texts, referred to in the aptly titled chapter *Food for the Idealist* (Armstrong, 1938: 131–195).

In 1898, aged thirty, Chester took his passion for culture and ideas into the public sphere and co-founded the *Ashington Debating and Literary Improvement Society* (ADLIS) with fellow miner, John Moffett Gillians. A typical ADLIS programme would

run from September to May, comprising fortnightly sessions in the Harmonic Hall (involving a variety of speakers) with a modus-operandi to debate the leading social and philosophical issues of the day, and dissect keynote works of literature (1938: 121–173). The society continued for thirty-one years and was a prominent cultural organization within the town, a precursor to the more widely known *Ashington Group* of working-class artists (Feaver, 2009: 15).

Taken at face value, the *Pilgrimage* text presents the reader with a window onto a particular historical period and community, framed by the author's sensibility and rationalized through the hindsight of an older man looking back at his younger naïve self. The tone is somber and reflective throughout, apart from the effusive passages devoted to particular authors (including Walt Whitman, Edward Carpenter and Richard Jefferies). It contains little that would contradict the impression that the thoughts and values expressed are genuinely felt. Whether this is an impartial appraisal of the integrity of the narrator is obviously open to question, given my attachment to the subject. Along with a cache of photographs and other familial tokens of historical significance, a copy of Chester's *Pilgrimage from Nenthead* memoir has been passed down the generations. Fast-forward eighty years from publication and that same (now yellowing) copy now lies on my desk at home. This endorsement (of sorts) of connectivity could be considered as something of a two-way bind, as an over-familiarity with the subject can lead to a lack of objectivity, or conversely be too literal and miss the emotional resonance of the story. Approaching the graphic adaptation of my great-grandfather's memoir, I recognise that there may be bias in my orientation to the subject-matter and that my role as interpreter of Chester's story necessitates, paradoxically, both critical distance and immediate empathy. Whilst there is a need to look beyond the *Pilgrimage* text and seek out corroborating voices and sources to help authenticate Chester's prose and negotiate the representation of historical events, there is enlightenment to be found in the "performed integrity" (Refaie, 2010: 171) of the design process and the remodelling of the memoir from one medium into another. Simply put, I cannot reproduce verbatim Chester's interior and exterior world view but can *create* it pictorially, and with the act of drawing arrive at a more nuanced understanding of his predicament.

Generally speaking, any adaptation of non-fictional source material concerns the conveyance of the 'authentic' and whilst it is important to address issues concerning partiality and veracity head-on, it is equally important to assess how the act of translation from one medium to another affects the integrity or cohesion of the narrational voice. Transposing the interior monologue of the literary memoir into the multi-modal (e.g., visual, verbal and sequential) structure of the comic book can encourage the reader to reflect upon a "plurality of perspectives" (Kukkonen, 2013: 85). It is also indicative of the operational complexity of the task and the variety of options open to the practitioner in the consideration of: fidelity to the original text, the phenomenological approaches to the adaptation and the desire to tell an engaging story. Art Spiegelman argues that the act of selection is an intricate process "of finding what one can tell, and what one can reveal, and what one can reveal beyond what one knows one is revealing" (Spiegelman, 2011: 73).

Spiegelman is referring obliquely to the navigation of the memoir narrative, in regard to his groundbreaking graphic memoir *Maus* (1986, 1992). The raw material for *Maus* was a series of recorded interviews made by Spiegelman with his father Vladek, starting in 1972 and completed over a ten-year period (ending with the death of Vladek in 1982). Lightly edited transcripts and audio of the original reel-to-reel tape recordings were made available with the publishing of Spiegelman's *MetaMaus* (2011); part research archive and part justification (or authentication) of his philosophical and formal approach to the adaptation of his father's oral testimony into a graphic memoir. Vladek's verbal account (and the emphasis placed upon his experiences) as a historical witness grounds the artwork in *Maus*, and the anthropomorphic conceit, providing much of the gravitas in the narrative. Spiegelman is alive to the subjectivity in his father's story and the vagaries of memory, but Vladek presents as the 'authentic self'. The authentic self is an individual "who is in touch with his or her real phenomenological and emotional experience and who reveals his or her own true thoughts, feelings and actions" (Gubrium & Holstein, 2009, quoted in El Refaie, 2012: 137).

This appreciation of the authentic self is applicable to Chester's narration and the spiritual thrust of the authors testimony in *Pilgrimage From Nenthead*. The

decision was made at the commencement of *The Checkweighman* project, in the initial selection and drafting of narrative elements, to attempt to 'recreate' that tone in the artwork – so that the translation between the original and the graphic adaptation appears transparent and fluent. Creatively, I felt it was important to adhere thematically and tonally to the constant in Chester's prose, that of the liberating potential of the mind, as this provides a compelling and dramatic counterpoint to the constraining environment of colliery life and the "industrial machine" (Armstrong, 1938: 66).

As evidence of this decision-making process, **Figure 1** shows proto-page layouts from the prologue sequence. The design is predicated on a nine-panel layout, whereby the vertical gutters have been removed to create three single landscape panels per page, encouraging the viewer to deliberate on the dynamic between text and image. Seen as a whole, the twelve-page prologue sequence interweaves panels which show a carpenter (partially obscured) setting about a set of bookshelves circa 1900, with discrete panels and close-ups of colliery life and period detail, including: pit-head buildings, train-sidings, allotments, colliery rows, domestic detail, empty

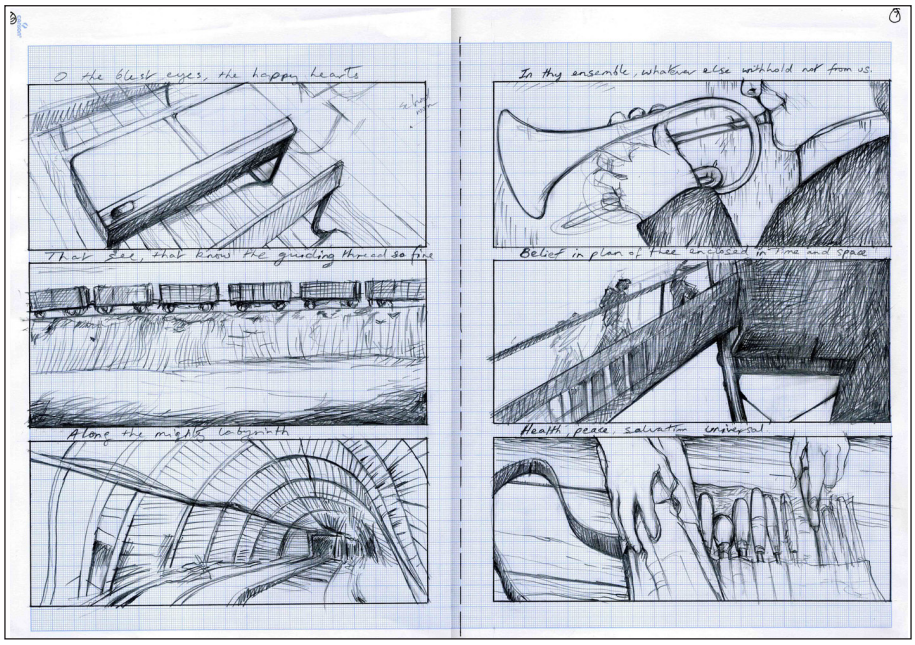

Figure 1: *The Checkweighman* prologue sequence page roughs 6 and 7, © 2018 Nick Dodds.

municipal rooms and mine-workings. Panel images are juxtaposed with 'unboxed' passages from *Leaves of Grass* by Walt Whitman (1921), a book that Chester considered as "holy writ" (Armstrong, 1938: 149).

Given the potential scale and scope of the *Checkweighman* project, the prologue sequence served as a useful limbering-up exercise, a way of feeling my way into the narrative and aesthetic of the graphic work as well as the process of selection. The course of sourcing and choosing which visual elements to include (and conversely what to exclude) and their sequential positioning on the page is an integral part of composition and the practice of reconstruction (or transportation from one medium to another). Implicit here, is my dual role of the artist as mediator and authenticator of the narrative ingredients. The images here have been chosen purposefully to represent key themes and locations that appear in the original memoir, sourced where possible from genuine photographic records of the period. The tension, or the convergence or divergence between the pictorial track and the verbal track (in this case, Walt Whitman's poetry) is a formal and cognitive device that will be explored further as the graphic work progresses. It is used here partly to encourage an emotional dissonance (a suggestion of the fallibility of memory) and partly to challenge the reader to render the disparate parts comprehensible or orientate towards individual interpretation.

The concept of 'anchorage' first postulated by Roland Barthes to describe the signification and correlation between verbal and pictorial messages in press photographs and magazine advertising (Barthes, 1982: 38) is relevant here, as it is directly applicable to the hybrid nature of the comic-book. Most graphic narratives rely on the intersection of words and images to convey meanings that neither could do alone. Scott McCloud identifies seven types of word/picture combinations (or forms of anchorage) deployed in comic book narratives, suggesting that each represents a different level of intersection or interdependence (McCloud, 2006: 128–130). Combination types identified by McCloud include: word specific or picture-specific (where meaning is dependent on a predominance of text *or* image), duo-specific (words and pictures conveying the same message), intersecting (combining yet also supplying information separately), interdependent (providing different aspects that

require closure by the reader), parallel (divergent or non-relational anchorage) and montage (textual elements rendered pictorially).

According to McCloud's theorem, the six panel/text combinations in the page layout above would appear to correspond to either the 'interdependent' or 'parallel' combination types. There are panels where the verbal and image messages converge ('labyrinth'/mineshaft drawing, 'ensemble'/bugle drawing) and panels where the message is left purposefully ambiguous ('guiding thread'/coal tubs, 'salvation universal'/carpentry tools). It could be argued that the "lack of a finite resolution, and equivocation" (Adams, 2008: 37) in image/verbal combinations, and the annexing of negative spaces (in panels, borders and gutters) to function as submerged parts of the story, can undermine the overall autobiographical authority of the text. However, rather than see this as a set of limitations to be overcome, it may be countered that any juxtapositions or breaches in the narrative world, creates space for the reader to inhabit and expand upon in their imagination, which may yield a richer narrative experience. Towards the end of the prologue, the scene with the carpenter (the autodidact) is given greater prominence. The prologue ends with a 'graphic match' sequence as the woodgrain of the completed bookshelves merge into the Cumberland fells and the commencement of the first chapter (see **Figure 2**).

Spiegelman's quote above about 'tell' and 'reveal' and the choices open to the graphic memoirist shows how intricate the adaptive process is to negotiate. Telling

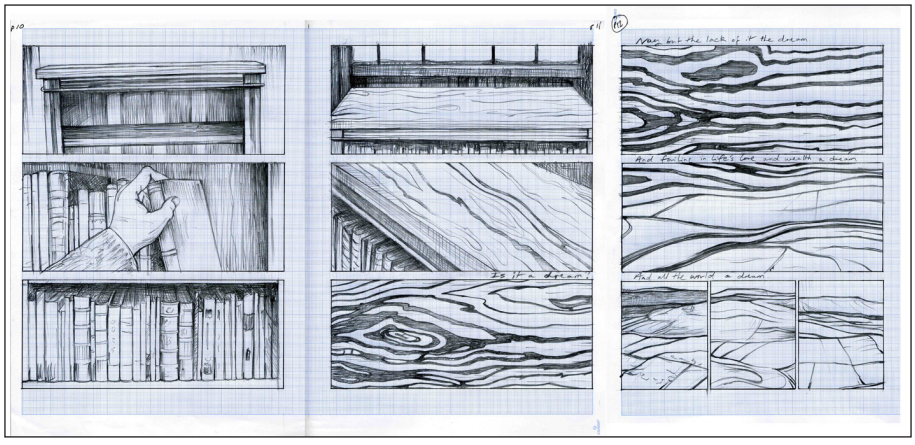

Figure 2: *The Checkweighman* prologue sequence page roughs 10 to 12, © 2018 Nick Dodds.

is clearly not the same thing as revealing. Spiegelman is signaling here that memoir has a multilayered relationship with the truth whilst simultaneously foregrounding the graphic memoirist's dual role as storyteller and authenticator. In preparing the ground then, it is important to identify and tackle thorny issues of 'truth' and 'authenticity' as this has a direct correlation to the shaping of the final graphic work.

Problematizing 'truth'

The subjective term 'authentication' is given primacy here over the more culturally charged notion of 'truth'. The latter has a varied and complex lineage which may lead to confusion with other societal or institutional discourses of truth-telling (testimony in a court of law, the religious confessional, moral aspects of truth-telling and so on), or venture too far into other academic fields (eg truth theory and philosophy) that stretch beyond the 'practice' remit of the work in hand. Cultural vantage points on the meaning of truth are continuously in flux, borne out in changing value systems and dependent on societal and historical variances. The syntagmatic formulation and cadence of Chester's text in *Pilgrimage from Nenthead* reads as if it comes from another age entirely, which of course it does. The formal phraseology and density of the prose, especially in the parts where Chester is attempting to voice a "peculiar intellectual experience" (Armstrong, 1938: vii) require patience and tenacity on the part of the modern reader, to grasp fully. In the preface, Chester explains his reasons for writing the memoir:

> *Having chosen early in my life to pursue a course involving self-reliance in matters of thought, I have not been able to restrain a growing desire to trace the history and development of this purpose, and to assess the results. This is my only justification for writing this book. Whether the results are in accord with final truth is another matter* (1938: vii).

The reference to 'final truth' in the last line is intriguing and connotes 'truth' as a singular, coherent theory of knowledge and justification. It is tempting to view the key strand of the book, the pursuit of intellectual liberation and self-fulfillment via literature and the power of the written word (rather than the pulpit), as indicative of the time period in which he was writing, namely the late 19th and early 20th century,

noted by Chester as "the most wonderful" and "tragic" in equal measure (ibid). There is a plausible link to be made between the political idealism that permeates *Pilgrimage From Nenthead* and the zeal in which Chester reviews his favoured essayists (including John Ruskin, Henry George, Sir James Frazer and others) and works of literature, to broader cultural ideas circulating in early European modernism concerning the rationalization of science, art and human experience. On Walt Whitman, Chester enthuses:

> *He rescued me from the pruriencies of a false Christianity in his ennoblement of the physical and the material … He closed for me the gap between matter and spirit, giving me a vision, splendidly convincing, of the oneness and unity of all things* (Armstrong 1938: 149).

If Chester's narration in the published *Pilgrimage* text idealizes a systematic coherence of truth and belief, connecting an inner spiritual life to a broader understanding of the physical world as it was then, then this presents an interesting challenge in contemplating the adaptation into a comic-book form. As mediator (and authenticator), do I attempt to recreate faithfully this vanished world (and mindscape), or acknowledge in the graphic 'reframing' that events in the story are visualized through the prism of my present?

From a contemporary standpoint it is questionable whether an absolutely true, accurate and realistic account of life events is ever workable in practice "even among the most scrupulous of practitioners" (Hatfield, 2005: 112). Present-day perspectives on 'truth' and 'truth-telling' perpetuated in western media are typified as problematic and unstable, particularly in the context of a post-internet (post-truth) environment of claim and counter-claim. In part, current attitudes can be seen as a continuation or extension of the post-modern "freewheeling paradox" (Gompertz, 2016: 350). Although post-modernity is a critical framework characterized more by its symptoms rather than any unifying logic, it can be seen as anti-foundational, as a "form of scepticism … a primarily negative form of philosophy, which sets out to undermine other philosophical theories claiming to be in possession of ultimate truth, or of criteria for determining what counts as ultimate truth" (Sim, 2011: 3).

A rejection of 'metanarratives' (and scepticism towards grand political schemes) is a key theme in Jean-Francois Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (1984). Lyotard's influential 'report' was written on the cusp between the age of industry and the era of digital communications and challenged the conventional truism that "scientific and technical knowledge is cumulative" (Lyotard, 1984: 7). The narrative of *The Post-Modern Condition* contains within it a premonition of a high-tech landscape where complexity is the new norm, where the "status of knowledge" and the control over the veracity and dissemination of that knowledge has redefined the sociopolitical agenda (Lyotard, 1984: 3). Reaching into every social sphere, the influence of the global media age has been widespread and profound, complicating notions of the (authentic) self and problematizing truth, now categorized as "multiple, fractured, and shaped by each individual's unique perspective and partial recall" (El Refaie, 2012: 136/137).

Authenticity and the graphic memoir

Memoir is a genre where the 'transparent relation' between real-life events and their representation is seen as a given, where perceptions of truthfulness are integral to the readership of the narrative and where the text faithfully conveys "a self and a life that exist or existed in the real world" (Pedri, 2013: 127). Real people, inhabiting actual geographical locations in specific socio-historical contexts, populate memoir texts and as such they "defer to a level of experience 'outside' the bounds of text" (Hatfield, 2005: 112).

To some extent memoir accounts are verifiable and because they pertain to actual events and locations, can be cross-referenced against other existing social documents to ascertain their relative accuracy. To corroborate some of the factual basis of Chester's account and underpin the creative work it has been necessary to seek out and review other sources of evidence, examples of which include: census records, town maps of Ashington for the period in question, the *Morpeth Herald* newspaper archive, independent publications by local historians, *The People's Collection* of photographs and oral histories at Beamish Museum, The Woodhorn Museum and Durham Mining Museum archives. The selection and mobilization of additional research material, to check factual veracity or help visualize period detail

in the artwork (for example, the layout of buildings at the heapstead at Ashington Colliery circa 1900), can be considered as an explicit form of authentication via the incorporation of documentation (El Refaie, 2012: 158). The insertion of documentary evidence is a common strategy employed by comic-strip artists dealing with autobiographical material, examples include: Spiegelman's selective use of a photographic portrait of Vladek in *Maus* (Spiegelman, 1992: 134), Bechdel's drawn copies of maps and rumination on the effect of topography on social relations in *Fun Home* (Bechdel, 2006: 126/127) and the photomontage of governmental documents belonging to Mary Talbot's father in the peritext to *Dotter of her Father's Eyes* (Talbot & Talbot, 2012: 2).

Life writing involves the element of causality as well as setting and chronology, and documented experiences are subject to an author's unique viewpoint, recall and motive for telling. Obscured by the passage of time, motives are less easy to verify than period detail. Moreover, direct lived experience is only one facet of an authentic memoir text, which may include the evaluation of received knowledge, chosen for "the value of the information to the narrator, the belief in its veracity, and the imperative that drives its dissemination" (Adams, 2008: 37). As is the case with *Pilgrimage from Nenthead*, autobiographical texts involve the recollection and reinterpretation of life events and influences, which with hindsight, are imbued with a significance that gives meaning to (and validation of) a life lived. As Hatfield acknowledges, comic book autobiography is similar to prose in this respect and "often zeroes in on the contact surface between cultural environment and individual identity" (Hatfield, 2005: 113).

Life episodes are chosen by the author for their personal resonance and are arranged and presented in conjunction with factual or period detail to create a narrative, where emotional and literal events interlace. Therefore, in a consideration of the present project, the adaptive process of memoir from one medium to another is prone to the frailties of human memory or subjective experience found in the original text, leaving gaps or viewpoints in the story arc that can only be partially recreated via auxiliary means of research, or may need to be imagined completely in their retelling.

Audiences "orient differently to stories that make a claim to fact" (Chaney, 2011: 232) and are encouraged to believe rather than make-believe. However, the relative 'truth value' in factual versus fictional texts is a contestable issue and it is important to recognise that all representation (non-fictional or fictional) involves levels of modification and invention. Autobiographical stories may be rooted in the real but require a certain amount of maneuvering and reshaping in their telling. True-life stories do not necessarily make for entertaining stories either. In order to get at the emotional essence of a real-life situation when translating into a visual sequence, the memoir practitioner may abridge a factual account or take liberties with the literal espousal of truth. Furthermore, graphic memoirists regularly employ the structural framing and syntax more readily associated with works of fiction, including for example: non-linear plotting, use of cliffhangers, catharsis and closure, omniscient and restricted narration, use of irony and reflexivity and so on. Interestingly, all three examples cited above deal with paternal themes and employ parallel constructs in order to frame the narrative: *Maus* is as much about the relationship between father and son as it is a story of holocaust survival, *Fun Home* relates the author and protagonist's sexual awakening alongside her father's secret homosexuality and *Dotter of her Father's Eyes* adroitly juxtaposes the biography of Lucia Joyce (daughter of James) and the childhood memoir of Mary Talbot (her father James Atherton was an eminent James Joyce scholar hence the filial connection).

Ultimately, the reader judges a graphic work of non-fiction "both by the standards of truth and falsity and by the standards of success as an artistic creation" (Adams, 1990: 3). In practice, the comic-strip artist constantly negotiates the fine line between truth-telling and artistic license, blending the factual and the fictive. For all its formal constraints and idiosyncrasies, the graphic memoir genre is one that "best allows for this simultaneous claim of autobiography and fiction, and for the simultaneous demand on the reader for both distance and identification" (Gardner, 2008: 22). Hence, the process of adaptation has a phenomenological dimension, and not just an operational one of "transporting a story from one medium to another" (Kukkonen, 2013: 73).

From a practitioner's perspective, it is possible to work within the constraints of the medium or better still, harness its unique properties to innovate ways to get at the emotional substance of a memoir work in order to "mediate identity, enter into (and out of) autobiographical pacts, and perform memory through visual and verbal combinations" (Chaney, 2011: 6). As I have highlighted in this paper, one of the key challenges here, in attempting to deal faithfully with the working-class subject and time period of Chester's memoir concerns the authentic creation (or recreation) of a bygone era, pictorially and sequentially reconstructed from a contemporary vantage point. As I hope to show in the adaptation of my great-grandfather's memoir, the spatial and temporal properties of the comic-book open up the potential for representing the "complex bleedings of past and present" (Gardner, 2008: 18). The author Hilary Mantel, best known for popularizing the genre of historical fiction but also known for her personal memoir writing, argues that the writer "must try to work authentically, hearing the words of the past, but communicating in a language the present understands" (Mantel, 2017: 6). A choice of words that is both instructional yet insightful, underscoring the performed integrity of the author and adapter of historical events.

Editorial Note

This article is part of the Creating Comics, Creative Comics Special Collection, edited by Brian Fagence (University of South Wales), Geraint D'Arcy (University of South Wales) and Ernesto Priego (City, University of London). This article is based on the paper 'Reframing the Graphic Memoir: How can the comic-strip artist negotiate modality and fidelity in the depiction of personal and historical narratives', first presented as part of the Creating Comics Creative Comics Symposium at USW, Cardiff in 2018.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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