

Pen and Tell Her

Drawing Power: Women's Stories of Sexual Violence, Harassment, and Survival

Edited by Diane Noomin

New York, NY; Abrams ComicArts, 2019, 272 pp., \$29.99, hardcover

Commute

By Erin Williams

New York, NY; Abrams ComicArts, 2019,

304 pp., \$24.99, hardcover

There is a short story “based on true events,” titled “Mr. Stevenson” that I have not been able to stop thinking about since I first read it in the new comics anthology, *Drawing Power: Women's Stories of Sexual Violence, Harassment, and Survival*. Composed by Ebony Flowers (whose recent book of comics, *Hot Comb*, I reviewed in this publication), it unfolds over six black-and-white pages. The narrative opens with the titular character, an un-striking middle-aged man dressed in a shirt and tie, hand poised to knock on his colleague's door. Said colleague, our narrator, a woman who looks to be younger and is also dressed in work attire, sits at a table grading papers. She looks up and pauses, either surprised or just absorbed in her work; the following panel, a wide shot, reveals that the two are alone in a spacious room; next she smiles, waves, and calls out, “Oh hey, Joe.” The gesture looks authentic, earnest. It is just a late evening of grading papers after a long day of teaching, interrupted.

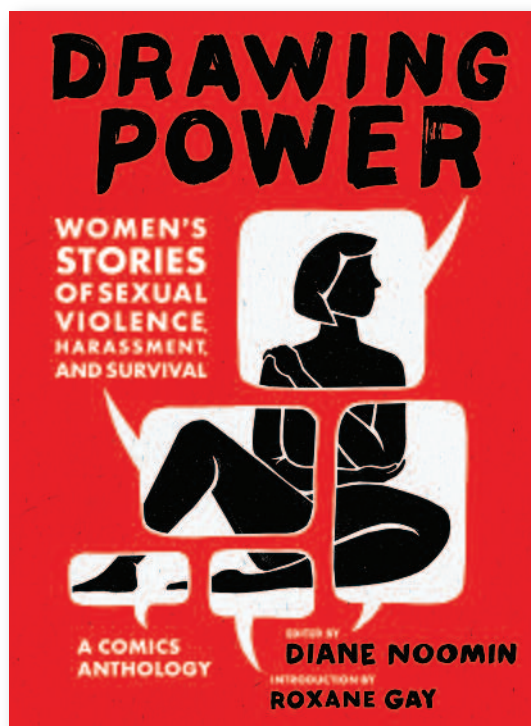
Of course, given the context of the story, we know that something distressing is to come. It happens by degrees: Mr. Stevenson leans in over her shoulder, taking a close, uninvited look at what she is working on and commenting on it. He stands

“This struggle—to insert oneself creatively into encounters experienced brutally outside of one's control; to make something out of others' attempts to erase and suppress the very nature of one's being—is apparent on every page.”

too close, his hand almost touching hers. She gets up to leave, and suddenly, forcefully, he demands, “Kiss me.” A full page-and-a-half of silent chaos and struggle ensues, as she scrambles to get away from his bodily assault. She runs past classrooms and down a flight of stairs, until she is face to face with the front of a library, where another female colleague, a librarian, is working late, shelving books. What follows is breathtaking, surprising, because it is so ordinary: a conversation between two women chatting nonchalantly about their days, the other woman oblivious to what has just transpired. Ebony gives nothing away, and the comic ends when she casually asks if the two can leave together. They do, and the story fades with the librarian going on and on about her adoration for Keanu Reeves, ignorant of our narrator's distress.

Flowers's story is searing because it reminds readers how often they, how often we, live, unsuspectingly, in the midst of traumas unvoiced,

Reviewed by Tahneer Oksman

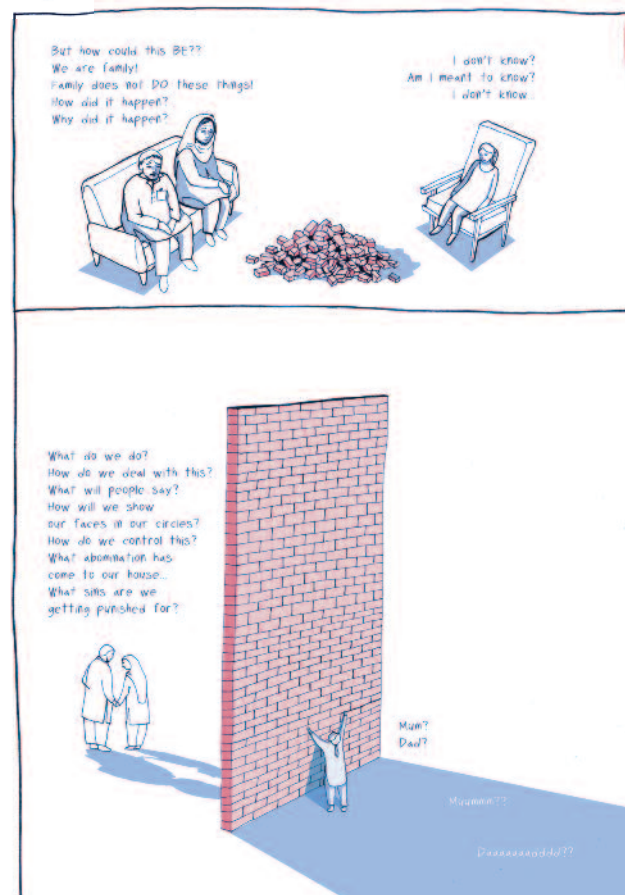


“Preface” by Diane Noomin.



When people came, he ran away. They took me to a police station. The police officer took away my skirt. There was blood on it. His? or mine?

“The Promenade” by Sarah Lightman.



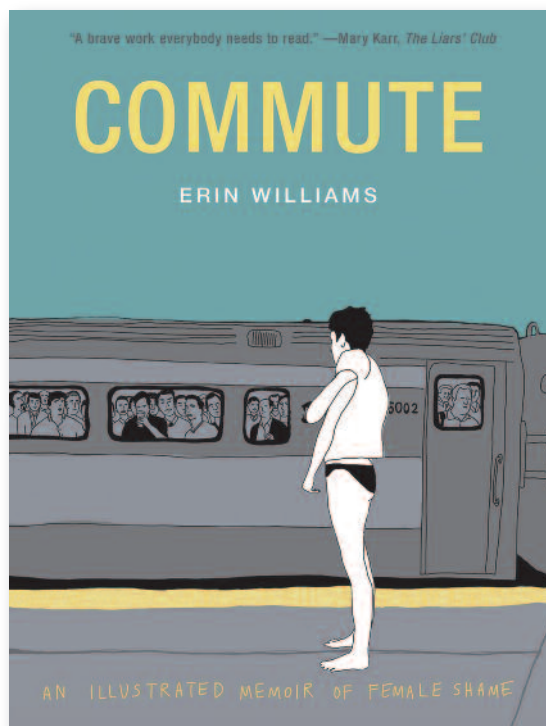
“Borders Broken, Edges Blurred” by Sabba Khan.

how such dramas regularly unfold around us, sometimes unbeknownst to us. By the end of the narrative we might wonder, have we, like the librarian, also rattled on and on about our favorite celebrity crush while someone beside us, an acquaintance or perhaps even an intimate, was processing an assault?

Drawing Power is crammed with such first-person narratives, stories that both individually and collectively overwhelm with disclosures of abuses, slights, and violations experienced in every imaginable context and setting, and committed by strangers and intimates, family members and friends, bosses and neighbors. Some of the sixty-plus artists whose work has been included chose to tackle violent scenes of rape and assault head-on, graphically committing to paper the worst moment, or moments, of their lives. Sometimes they comment on that choice, picturing themselves at the drawing desk, a pencil in hand. "In my comics I get the final word," writes Jennifer Camper at the end of her comic, "Noncompliant," which opens as her narrator admits to rarely making autobiographical comics. "I prefer fiction where I can control what happens." Nonetheless, as we read through, our narrator's sidelong commentary on choices she has made about what to leave out as well as what to include in these very panels makes it clear that this particular unfolding, what and how she has chosen to tell, is hers and hers alone.

This struggle—to insert oneself creatively into encounters experienced brutally outside of one's control; to *make something* out of others' attempts to erase and suppress the very nature of one's being—is apparent on every page of the anthology. Roxane Gay writes in her introduction to the volume: "There are means, beyond language, for people to make sense of and articulate their place in the world." In *Drawing Power*, we witness a legion of such means, from visual metaphors of loneliness and solitude (a brick wall; a pair of broken handcuffs) to mood-inflected lines and designs (sparse, to suggest surreality and disembodiedness; expressive, springy, and chaotic to convey anxiety, angst, anger). Crucially, the details of each individual portrait vary, as race, class, ability, sexuality, and gender intersect with the particulars of each interaction, or cycle of interactions. Transphobia and misogyny reinforce each other here; racism and misogyny there; racism, misogyny, and homophobia there. And while each individual struggles alone, and differently, many of the broad strokes seem, often, to rhyme: the conflicting internal struggles leading up to painful, shocking encounters; the mixed-bag of emotions—shame, fear, irritation, anxiety, anger, shock, denial—that follows; the difficulty of telling, or of trying to tell.

Drawing Power was edited by Diane Noomin, a powerhouse of a cartoonist who was involved in the early, important all-female underground comics collective that published *Wimmen's Comix*, starting in the early 1970s. She went on to collect two influential anthologies of comics by women cartoonists: *Twisted Sisters: A Collection of Bad Girl Art* (1991) and *Twisted Sisters 2: Drawing the Line*



10 THE NUMBER OF MEN WHO LOOK ME IN THE EYE WHILE I WALK TO WORK.

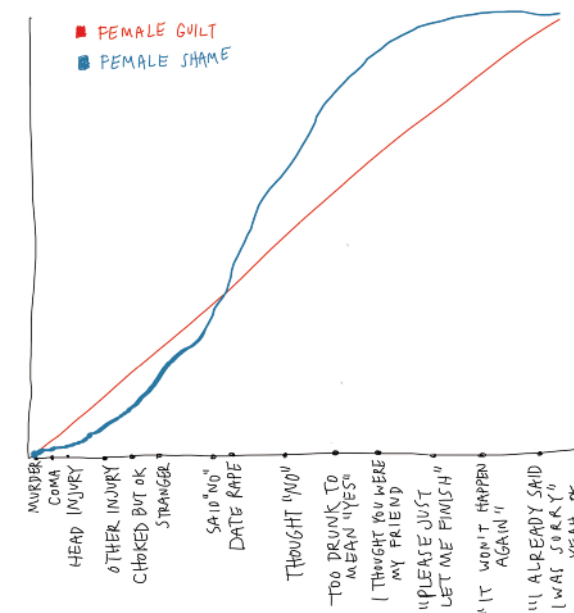


(1995). Here, she has managed to bring together her largest collection yet, a high-quality book that joins a growing, vital canon of comics on the topic of sexual violence and harassment, including a collective graphic memoir, *Take It As A Compliment* (2015), edited and drawn by Maria Stoian, a collection of stories, *Daddy's Girl* (2008), by Debbie Drechsler, and *Becoming Unbecoming* (2016), by UK-based cartoonist Una (a pseudonym), who also has a short, powerful piece, "Words Fail Me," included in this collection.

The experience of reading numerous, diverse stories of sexual violence and predation is different, of course, from sinking into one extended narrative, as in Erin Williams's *Commute*, a work released by the same publisher as *Drawing Power* (Abrams ComicArts) and in the same season. *Commute* is divided into sections based on the rhythms and occupations of our autobiographical narrator's workday: "Get Ready," "Walk the Dog,"



WE'RE RARELY ALL VICTIM. FOR A LONG TIME I THOUGHT RAPE WAS SEX. WHERE, EXACTLY, DO YOU DRAW THE LINE?




"Walk to Work," "Take a Break," "Ride the Train," etc. Drawn in a delicate and spare yet expressive style, in each section we are privy to what the narrator sees, at least in starts and bits, and what she dreams or thinks about; we also get glimpses of who looks—or leers—at our narrator, and who looks right through her. There is a lightness and charm, at first, to many of these associative patchworks, which often suddenly erupt in unexpectedly vicious ways. In one early scene, as she walks her dog around the neighborhood, she sees a van parked outside a house. "A van drives every morning and sits out front," she writes in her matter-of-fact way, the words neatly laid out in handwritten letters beneath a tight, quiet drawing of a faceless figure (our narrator) walking a dog beside a house with a van parked in front. "I really think it's a meth lab," our narrator speculates on the next page, taking her readers on a meandering,

entertaining ramble for a few pages. But suddenly, the truth intrudes: “Sometimes he pulls his van very close to where I’m walking, onto the wrong side of the street, and whispers.” The accompanying image depicts a disturbing, sprawling “helloooooo,” wandering from the man in the van’s face to touch our narrator’s grimacing figure. It’s not all in her head, we are suddenly made to see.

In many ways, this book is all about that very fact: how difficult it can be, for some, often for women, to remain inside their heads, to wander lightly, or lonely, when out in the world. Our narrator tells us about her history with alcoholism, a story inevitably tangled up with consensual as well as forced and traumatic sexual encounters. She

cannot even confront her own addiction without menacing men who ogle and interfere. “My first sexual experience was so bad that I was drunk for all sex after that,” she confesses late in the book, a sentence divulging how entwined desire and danger had become for her. “How else could I be?”

The book ends with a final section, titled “Home,” that feels out of place, uneven, as our narrator suddenly turns to tell us the story of early motherhood, what she describes as a kind of bodily reinvention. There is a startling discrepancy between these scenes of new motherhood and the rest of the book. But perhaps this unevenness, between “home” and the rest of the world, is most telling of all. How do you conclude a story built in

and through interruptions and breaks? You build a cocoon around yourself, and, as the case may be, around yourself with your baby. It may last just a few pages, but it’s your cocoon, your story. 

Tahneer Oksman is an associate professor at Marymount Manhattan College, the author of “How Come Boys Get to Keep Their Noses?": *Women and Jewish American Identity in Contemporary Graphic Memoirs* (Columbia University Press, 2016), and the co-editor of the anthology, *The Comics of Julie Doucet and Gabrielle Bell: A Place Inside Yourself* (University Press of Mississippi, 2018). She often reviews graphic novels and illustrated works for the *Women’s Review of Books*.

Tied, Bound



On Division

By Goldie Goldbloom

New York, NY; Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2019, 288 pp., \$26.00, hardcover

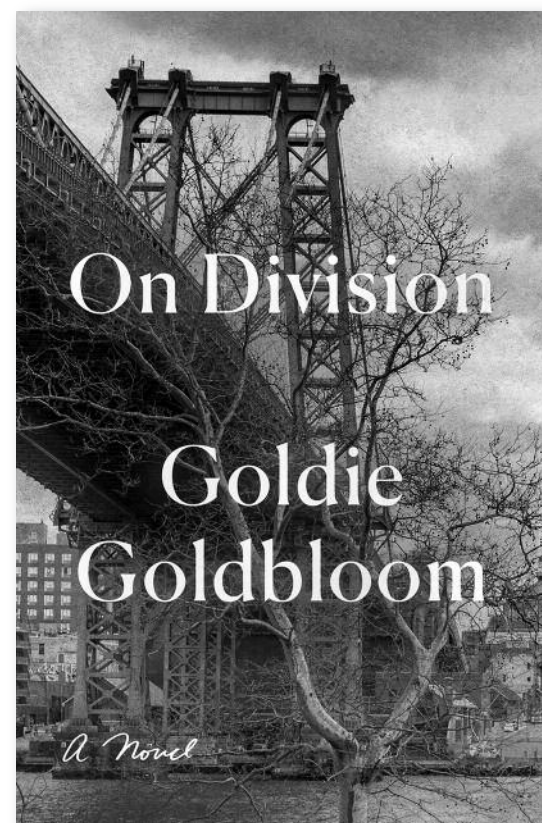
Reviewed by Karen Houppert

In this novel of a middle-aged awakening, Goldie Goldbloom draws upon the story of Abraham, whom God spoke to at age one hundred telling him that his ninety-year-old wife, Sarah, would soon bear him a son. *On Division*, set in contemporary Chassidic Brooklyn, New York, opens with fifty-seven-year-old Surie Eckstein learning that she is pregnant with twins. Already the mother of ten children ranging in age from thirteen to thirty-nine, she has thirty-two grandchildren. Surie is horrified when she gets the news: “The women of the community would say mazal tov, but privately, they’d blush for her, the sex-crazed hussy.”

Embarrassed by this public sign that she and Yidel, her husband of forty-one years, are still

having sex—recreational rather than strictly procreational—she hides the pregnancy from her family and friends. This secret, as well as the volunteer work she begins doing on the down-low at a Manhattan-based ob-gyn clinic, is both a burden and a source of empowerment that pushes her to reconsider women’s places in the Chassidic community. “Never before had she kept a secret from Yidel,” Goldbloom writes. “Never had she felt so lonely or so powerful.... Again and again, the words rose into her mouth, and again and again she swallowed them down.”

Surie grapples with the age-old question of how to balance liberation and personal fulfillment with the joys and comforts that community and tradition



provide. And *community* is writ large here. Surie lives in the heart of Williamsburg’s Chassidic neighborhood in a house with four generations of family. Her in-laws, refugees who met in a displaced person’s camp in war-torn Eastern Europe, live on the ground floor of the row house. Her judgmental, yet well-intentioned eldest daughter and her family live on the second floor. Surie and her husband, a famous “sofer” or scribe who writes Torah scrolls that take an entire year to produce, live on the third floor with two of her youngest sons. Her husband tans hides for the Torahs on the roof. Chickens and grandchildren roam freely about the premises.

Surie is tired. She is looking forward to retirement from motherhood and to a little relaxation as she approaches her sixties. Cooking and cleaning and childcare and carrying laundry from the third floor to the basement fill her days, and now, as her youngest enters adolescence, the thought of going all the way back to diapers and strollers and midnight feedings dismays her. Still, she dismisses the notion of abortion for religious reasons—although “she’d almost, not quite, prayed for a miscarriage”—and also because the weight of

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