Afterlives

Anne Frank's Diary: The Graphic Adaptation

Adapted by Ari Folman; Illustrations by David Polonsky

New York, NY: Pantheon Books, 2018, 160 pp., $24.95, hardcover

A Bubble

By Geneviève Castrée

Montreal, Quebec: Drawn & Quarterly, 2018, 16 pp., $12.95, hardcover

Reviewed by Tahneer Oksman

Anne Frank's Diary: The Graphic Adaptation, adapted by Ari Folman and illustrated by David Polonsky, is not the first work to transform Anne Frank's story into a new format, and it won't be the last. In addition to the numerous—some might say endless—reworkings of Frank's diary into literature, performances, and artworks (a phenomenon Francine Prose records in her 2009 book, *Anne Frank: The Book, The Life, and the Afterlife*), several graphic narratives recounting Anne Frank's biography already exist. These, all aimed at young audiences, generally present uninspired illustrations of a now-famous history: as though the translation to a new medium, like that to a new language, does not necessarily require a leap of the imagination.

How, then, might one maintain, as Walter Benjamin describes it in his famous essay, "The Task of the Translator," both "fidelity and freedom" in taking such a well-known work and adapting it into a form its own author would barely have recognized, and would never have chosen to undertake herself? "If I could draw, I'd like to have sketched her as she was then," writes Anne Frank towards the end of the September 28, 1942 entry of her diary, in reference to a series of critical remarks she has just recounted hearing from Mrs. van Daan, one of the adults hiding along with her family at "the secret annex" in Amsterdam. This is a clear declaration of Frank's limitations, and perhaps even a resistance, to putting her story down in pictures rather than direct prose, even as she also points to a potential affinity between what she is trying to tell and a mode, visual narrative, often associated with the lowbrow, with simplicity and childishness.

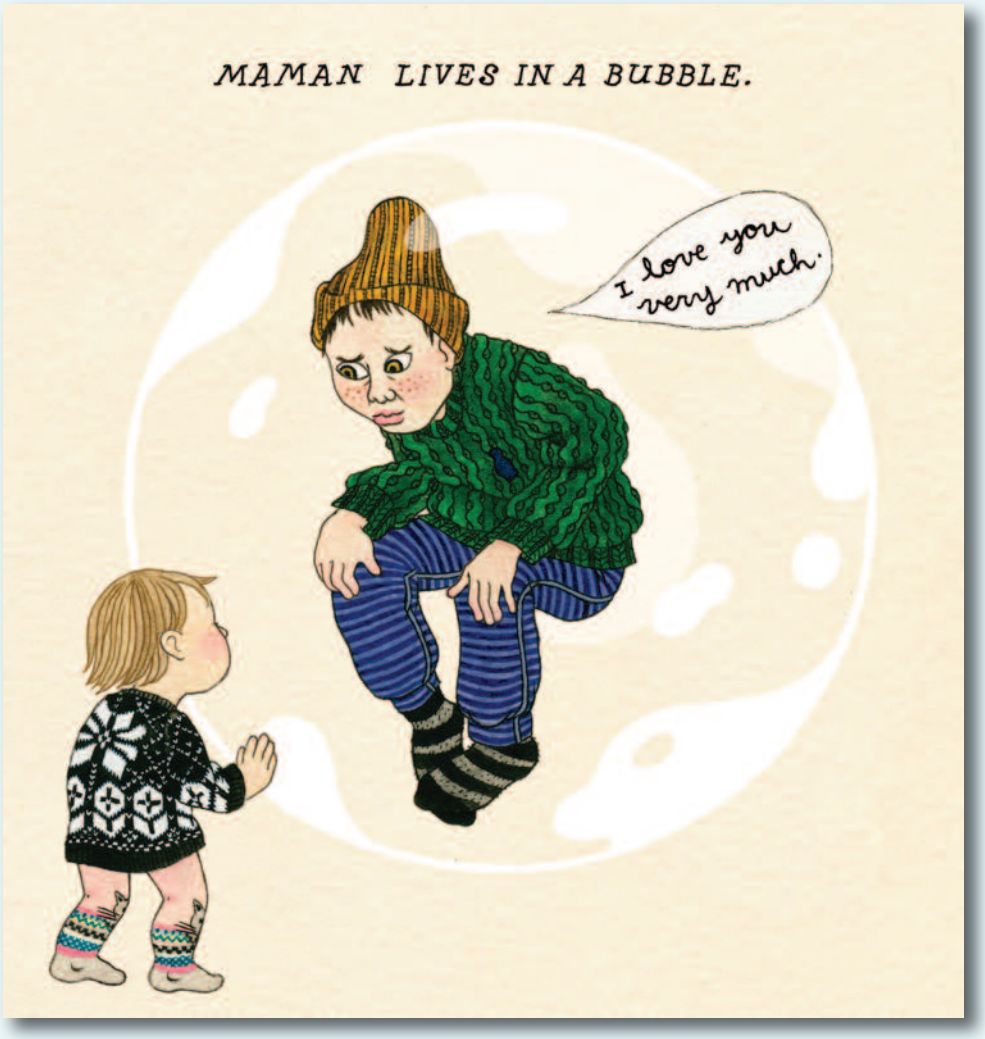
But the creators of *Anne Frank's Diary* seem keenly aware of this irony, even as, on their pages adapting this particular excerpt, they include those illustrated caricatures that the author of the original work quite consciously never created. They republish Frank's original diary entry over two pages, presented in a neat and consistent typography clearly borne from technology (even if meant as a font indexing "handwriting"). Four drawn hybrid creatures frame the words. They have the bodies of dragons, with long, spiky tails, and the heads of humans, accented by sharp, white teeth and spouting great waves of fire. Rereading this entry, the earnest illustrations seem an odd juxtaposition, clashing as they do with the also earnest but more variable, often humorous, voice of the written text. Here we witness fidelity and freedom at work: what the diary entry faithfully imparts through written language is complicated by this transformation of the text, so un-Frank-like in its execution that we are made keenly aware of this graphic diary as an "afterlife" to the original.

Throughout, the graphic adaptation emphasizes the visual nature of Frank's text—if not on a literal level (though, of course, images of the diary and its pages abound), then on the level of description. Frank was so adept at bringing to life, on the page, activities as they unfolded, and at developing vivid characterizations of the people around her. Through her prose she created compelling, multi-dimensional images of a life in hiding, of terror but also boredom, of unbelievable limitations but also small slivers of freedom. These came precisely from her use of the diary—from being able to make

something of nothing, from creating with the potential to leave a lasting impression. Mrs. van Daan is repeatedly pictured on her chamber pot, an image that, however directly drawn from the original text, in this case helps highlight the sheer absurdity of the situation. Another nearly silent page but for the narrative box leading into it, reading, "It's always about me and my sister...," pictures a series of drawings of Anne beside Margot. In each of the eight pairings, Margot's expression is almost always the same: she looks composed, calm, and unaffected by the variety of intense moods that her sister undergoes beside her. Anne pouts; she screams; she furiously scrawls in her diary; she points at an invisible interlocutor; she pushes food from the table in disgust. An extension of the diary, this expertly crafted page shows us what Frank has, with some exasperation, tried so hard to put into words. That she feels often compared, and judged; that her moods wildly fluctuate, often to her own surprise; that she is still trying to figure out, as Virginia Woolf famously put it in "A Sketch of the Past," how "far I differ from other people."

Anne Frank's Diary: The Graphic Adaptation is not without its limitations and challenges. At times, the composers of the text seem so intent on giving shape to every detail in the original that they leave little to readers' imaginations. This is the case, for example, on a page where, beneath Frank's early declared intent, addressed to Kitty, "to confide everything to you, as I have never been able to confide in anyone," there is a large picture of her whispering to the drawn silhouette of a little girl, a figure encased in an oversized drawing of the diary. Here, as in other places throughout, too much of what can be more powerfully conveyed through absence, or allusion, is transferred directly to the reader via images.

More frequently, however, such insertions bring renewed vigor to a text, and story, that has been fatigued through its continued recognition and success. In one of the most powerful pages in the adapted text, Anne Frank is pictured twenty-five, thirty years down the road—what she might have looked like had her life, like that of so many others, not been mercilessly cut short. She sits at her desk, a fountain pen and paper before her, a typewriter beside her. There are framed images behind her—cover stories from newspapers capturing her life, the fame ostensibly having emerged as a result of her wildly successful future publication, the book she had wanted to create out of what she recorded in the diary. "What I'm experiencing here is a good beginning to an interesting life," the narrative text, from her diary, above the image of her now in mid-life partially reads. At such moments, the graphic adaptation points us to the very gap, between what we, her readers, can imagine for her of her missed future, and what she would never have the opportunity to live through. The distance is devastating.



Anne Frank's Diary: The Graphic Adaptation reads as a book of grief, even though the story it tells is one of a time in which its narrator could only anticipate death as a hypothetical, a possibility that, however close by, was as yet undetermined. The recently published *A Bubble*, by beloved cartoonist and musician Geneviève Castrée, is an illustrated board book that was drawn as its composer faced the final days of her life. A brief afterword, written by Castrée's husband, Phil Elverum, explains: "In her final weeks alive, Geneviève clung to finishing this book for our daughter with intense focus and devotion. I think she was trying to cast a spell, to draw herself into survival. She didn't get to finish."

The short work tells, in fourteen pages, a story of "Maman," who "lives in a bubble"—she's ill with cancer and has a compromised immune system. The narrative is conveyed from the point of view of the small child, who is present on almost every page, interacting at times from inside of, and at times around, her mother's bubble. The bubble looks almost like an amniotic sac. "I no longer remember the time when she didn't live in the bubble," the child narrator conveys, and below the two are pictured, in equally magnificent and colorful clothing, in conversation and at play. "I was too little."

Castrée's book is a work of unbelievable dedication and care. It is also a truly magnificent work of art. Each page is drawn with both simplicity and care. As the bubble bursts, three quarters of the way through the narrative, tiny hand-drawn droplets surround Maman's still pumping feet in the only image of the book that features her alone. Soon, the two are reunited, bubble no longer in sight, and the story ends as they walk, hand in hand, in search of an ice cream cone. If the hard pages of board books are generally meant to preserve such objects from the multi-sensory investments of its little readers, from drool and tearing, pulling hands, in this case it feels like the only appropriate material for a narrative about the sturdy, enduring nature of this love.

Like Frank's diary, Castrée's work reminds us of the limitations of resolutely assigning certain kinds of literature just to children, or just to adults. The book, as visually delightful as it is moving, addresses love, grief, loss, and renewal by imparting its truths head on. Maman's heavy tears fall as she grasps her little girl, announcing, "My beloved!" She gets the long wiring attached to her nose wound around her leg on another page, her eyes cast downward in sorrow as her child and husband play, proximate but separated from her, outside the bubble. Despite these fluctuating moods, the intense bond between parent and child is always apparent. The book ends with the two united even as each page inevitably evokes both the sorrow and joy of an inevitable break come too soon.

In *Bubble*, the now departed Castrée places her daughter at the center of the story, leaving room for possibility, for life beyond the page. Even though her story will soon come to a close, the work opens up a space for a coming together, a kind of union after loss. By giving her daughter the "reins" in this final story—by putting it into first person, from her point of view—it is as though Castrée grants her, and by extension her readers, too, permission; a blessing. Live your life. Continue, even after I'm gone, and build on this testament to life, to love, that I have started. Let my story live on, and grow, through you.

Tahneer Oksman is an assistant 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 forthcoming 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*.