

Graphic Depictions

Rock Steady: Brilliant Advice from My Bipolar Life

By Ellen Forney

Seattle, WA; Fantagraphics, 2018, 192 pp., \$19.99, paperback

Graphic Reproduction: A Comics Anthology

Edited by Jenell Johnson

University Park, PA; Penn State University Press, 2018, 232 pp., \$26.95, paperback

Reviewed by Tahneer Oksman

“How could I keep track of my mind, with my own mind?”

This is the question long-time autobiographical cartoonist Ellen Forney directly poses halfway through her poignant 2012 graphic memoir, *Marbles: Mania, Depression, Michelangelo, and Me*, a book about her journey to a bipolar diagnosis around her thirtieth birthday, and its aftermath. A number of authors have tackled the experience of grappling with mental illness, such as William Styron in *Darkness Visible*, Kay Redfield Jamison in *An Unquiet Mind*, and Andrew Solomon in *The Noonday Demon*. But Forney—a self-described sex-positive, vegetarian, queer cartoonist—brings a unique punk aesthetic and quirky sense of humor, packaged in the engaging, generative format known as comics.

As a number of wildly popular memoirs created in that mode have shown us—like Art Spiegelman’s Pulitzer-prize winning *Maus*, a book about his relationship with his Holocaust-surviving father, and, more recently, Alison Bechdel’s *Fun Home*, a *New York Times* bestselling graphic memoir turned award-winning Broadway hit exploring her father’s death as a possible suicide—the label of comics does not, as the name seems to suggest, necessarily mean that the content is funny. To borrow a phrase coined by that famous theorist of seeing, John Berger, comics is “another way of telling,” a medium with a vernacular, grammar, and history all its own that simply uses drawn images as well as words to tell stories.

Ellen Forney opens *Marbles* with a depiction of her face in profile, eyes shut tight, eyebrows engaged as in pain or deep concentration. She’s twenty nine and getting a tattoo drawn by her favorite cartoonist etched onto her back. “Every time Owen traced a new line with his needle,” read inky black, all-cap, hand-drawn letters, “I could see the sensation—a bright white light, an electrical charge, up and to the right.” For the synaesthetic Forney, it is an appropriate start to a story about striving, post-diagnosis, to find a cohesive self.

“I was officially a crazy artist,” she declares at first, with some relief. But soon, she feels caught between the helpfulness of diagnosis and the painful fears associated with such labeling. “Isn’t ‘crazy artist’ just a stereotype anyway?” she asks several pages later. With comics, Forney is able to reflect the complicated, embodied tensions and paradoxes that make up her experience: feeling like

her body and mind are at war, trying desperately to convey to others the chaos that seems to fill her up in ways so difficult to describe. She includes stunning excerpts from her sketchbook throughout and these self-portraits help orient her when she feels most off-course. “I soon learned to keep drawing until I really nailed my feelings down,”

she explains. “I didn’t get nearly the same relief if I only came close.”

Six years later, Forney has followed up that successful visual memoir with a related book, *Rock Steady: Brilliant Advice from My Bipolar Life*. As she explains in her introduction, this book presents something of a “flipped focus.” Whereas *Marbles* narrated her personal story, *Rock Steady* could be considered a self-help manual, a book to plant on the nightstand and pick up as needed. In eight chapters, she works through the coping mechanisms that have helped her, elements of her “rock steady strategy” (Sleep, Meds, Eat, Doctor, Mindfulness, Exercise, Routine, Tools, Support System). What Forney most distinctly contributes to both memoir and manual is her relentless pursuit to “keep track” of invisible internal ecologies using the tool she knows best: drawing. The second book offers her readers a pared down version of the first, even as it invites them to try out some of her own visual strategies. “Drawing a thing can take the focus outside of yourself,” she explains on one page, above an assortment of reproduced self-portraits from her first book, “and may be easier than trying to find the right words.”

Helpfully, Forney shows readers how illustrations can also arrange ideas and procedures in organizational schemes that can be more efficiently digested. In each chapter, whether

EVERYONE’S SYMPTOMS ARE A LITTLE DIFFERENT. YOUR TREATMENT NEEDS TO ADDRESS THE PARTICULAR WAYS YOUR DISORDER AFFECTS YOU.

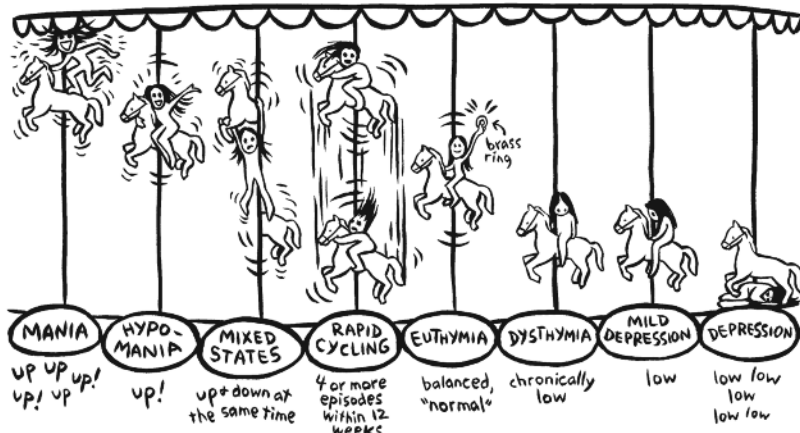
BIPOLAR DISORDER + MAJOR DEPRESSION ARE UNDER THE UMBRELLA OF

MOOD DISORDERS,

CONDITIONS WHERE EMOTIONS ARE DERAILED FOR EXTENDED PERIODS OF TIME. THE MAIN TYPES ARE:

- ★ **BIPOLAR I:** ALTERNATING MANIC + DEPRESSIVE EPISODES ← (that’s me)
- ★ **BIPOLAR II:** ALTERNATING HYPOMANIC + DEPRESSIVE EPISODES
↳ “HYPOMANIA” = MILD MANIA
- ★ **CYCLOTHYMIA:** ALTERNATING HYPOMANIC + MILD DEPRESSIVE EPISODES
- ★ **UNIPOLAR DEPRESSION:** SINGLE OR RECURRENT EPISODES WITH NO MANIA
- ★ **DYSTHYMIA:** CHRONIC, LOW-GRADE DEPRESSION

...WHICH REFER TO THESE MOOD STATES:



NOTE: SOME BIPOLAR PEOPLE EXPERIENCE MANIA AS HIGH ENERGY BUT NOT EUPHORIC. FEELING “DYSPHORIC” MIGHT MEAN AMPED BUT IRRITABLE, EASILY MOVED TO ANGER, OR IMPATIENT.

ANOTHER NOTE: “BIPOLAR DISORDER” + “MANIC DEPRESSION” ARE THE SAME THING.

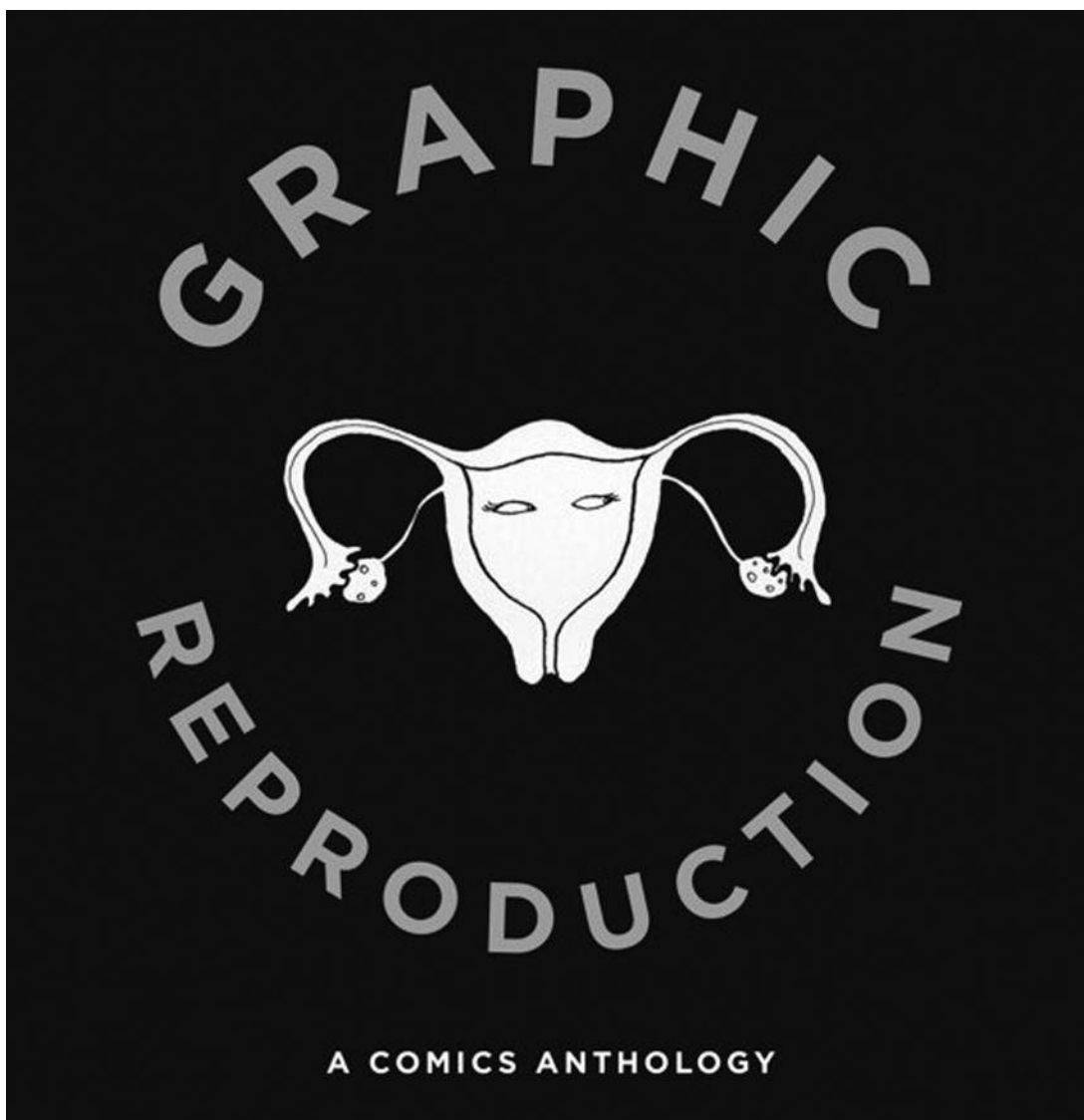
“Comics is a medium with a vernacular, grammar, and history all its own that simply uses drawn images as well as words to tell stories.”

describing the side-effects of certain medications or self-calming breathing techniques, she presents complex catalogues and typographies packaged in creatively revealing formats: a chart, framed by a giant, cartoonish open mouth, diagramming steps one might take in order to more easily swallow daily prescriptions; an inventory of tactics to use in case of emergency (“meditate”; “journal”; “mantras”; “music”) featuring hand-drawn words planted inside a giant anchor; a four-page annotated version of the author’s actual diary entries from 2004, redrawn in fragments on the page and broken down into lists grouping triggers, warning signs, and coping mechanisms.

With charm, Forney effectively communicates to readers that “you are not alone, and you are not alone in feeling alone,” the subheading to her concluding chapter. This sentiment similarly frames Jenell Johnson’s edited anthology, *Graphic Reproduction: A Comics Anthology*, a book that is also concerned with speaking out—or, really, drawing out—about societal stigmas, in this case those connected to having a reproductive system. As with Forney’s manual, Johnson’s book has a utilitarian focus. The collection includes both lesser-known and established artists (Alison Bechdel, Joyce Farmer, and Carol Tyler, to name a few of the latter types) and traverses the often concealed landscape of reproduction beyond the conventional “mythic” stories of heteronormative, easy-peasy procreation where maybe one’s biggest fear is not getting the crib put together in time. Its chapters include experiences with abortion, miscarriage, and infertility as well as living for nine months as a “pregnant butch,” or undergoing a generally low-stress homebirth only to be faced with intrusive, shaming medical personnel in the aftermath to that transformative event.


Johnson is an academic with a personal interest in the subject, which she describes in her introduction and in her comic strip “Present/Perfect,” documenting her seven-year long experience with fertility treatment. “I’ve never felt more like a body,” she writes of that time. She argues, as many comics scholars and critics before her have, that the “plasticity” of the comics form, its constitutional vacancies and gaps, its history and range of stylizations and iconographies, makes it ideal for expressing common yet often unseen experiences. Like others involved in the “Graphic Medicine” movement—the use of comics to provide a patient-centered perspective on experiences related to the body, including illness and disability—she believes anyone can use comics to show her unique perspective and, hopefully, feel empowered by sharing it.

Paula Knight’s “Spooky Womb” deploys an especially original and compelling visual metaphor: the protagonist interacts with a ghostly but very active set of floating reproductive organs with expressive eyes. In another stand-out narrative, “Losing Thomas and Ella: A Father’s



Story,” Marcus B. Weaver-Hightower depicts the loss of twins at twenty-two weeks. The drawings include a close-up illustration of the couple holding their delicate, stillborn son. It’s a poignant and powerful depiction of grief.

The form juxtaposes image with text to create emotional complexity in the most successful comics. By contrast, the weakest pieces in the anthology are pedantic, particularly the opening two narratives addressing abortions, in 1973 and 2015, respectively. Laden with (important) information regarding options, obstacles, and after-effects, both abortion stories chapters lack engaging, multi-dimensional individual characters and arcs to shape and carry these facts.

Forney’s and Johnson’s new books are each intended to function also as starting points for their readers’ own forays into comics. Once they’ve drawn you in, they ask you to draw. More and more writers, activists, and storytellers are heeding the call. 

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).

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