COMICS FORUM

WELFARE





Comics Forum 2026

Abstracts and Speaker Biographies

Thursday 12 November

Panel 1: Education and Training

Drawing Myself as a Cat When Being a Human Gets Too Much: Comic-Making and Autistic Wellbeing in Academia via 'CATADEMIC!!'

Zoe Robertson

While rates of diagnoses increase, support for autistic people and communities dwindles as disability welfare initiatives are defunded or already-scant resources are stretched thinner. Stagnant waiting lists, steadily rising tides of ableism, and the weaponisation of neurodiversity against other marginalised groups all leave us feeling alienated and disempowered. Addressing the support gap becomes something we often have to navigate ourselves, creatively engineering our own, tailored wellbeing techniques out of necessity. Springboarding from an autoethnographical approach, this paper explores making comics as a method of managing personal welfare by reflecting on the experience of drawing my own strip: CATADEMIC!! (2025-present). Interested in the power of author-insert avatars to reconcile neurodivergent mind-body divides, and comic-making as somatic practice, this paper intersects Comics and Disability studies to emphasise how the medium's multi-modal, coalescent features provide a unique and comforting home to nurture autistic wellbeing.

Zoe Robertson (she/her) is a third-year PhD researcher at The University of Edinburgh, writing about Postcolonial theory and comics. She has previously presented at The International Graphic Novels and Comics & *Bande Dessinée* Society Conference (2025), co-ordinated her university's graphic novels reading group (2024-2026), and has recently been published in the *Journal of Graphic Novels and Comic*s (2026). Outside of her studies, she writes science fiction stories and makes theatre. Unlike the Cat she draws, Zoe is a human girl with a human girl's head.

Making it to the Registers: co-creating a comic on the experiences and welfare of internationally-trained healthcare professionals in the UK

Marie-Andree Jacob and Priyasha Saksena

From its inception, the NHS has been dependent on the labour of migrant healthcare professionals, often from the global south. However, migrant healthcare professionals often face a mixed welcome in the country, having to manage stringent immigration requirements as well as questions about their skills and expertise. In order to be able to practise their professions in the UK, migrant doctors and nurses have to comply with strict requirements put in place by the statutory regulators (General Medical Council and Nursing and Midwifery Council). The language and skills requirements have been

put in place for the understandable goal of ensuring patient safety, but their current application also significantly affects the welfare of migrant healthcare professionals.

Against this background, the Leeds-based research project and comic *Making it to the Registers* explore the colonial lineage and implications of the professional registration of internationally trained health care workers in the UK.

Our paper zooms in on the lived experiences of healthcare professionals, focusing on both the difficulties and support they encounter when aiming to meet UK regulatory requirements and join the professional registers. The paper introduces these findings through extracts of the Graphic Medicine International Collective (GMIC) 2026 Awards-shortlisted comic *Making it to the Registers: A migrant healthcare workers' story*, and of extracts from short films on the reception of the comic. We also reflect on the process of co-creation between nurses, doctors, researchers and artists of this alternative format to amplify the voices of overseas-trained healthcare workers and disseminate the challenges they face to obtain recognition.

The comic is available open access here:
https://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/id/eprint/236340/

Priyasha Saksena is a legal historian focusing on the development of concepts and institutions within the British empire and their contemporary effects. She researches how public international law has been used as a language to exercise authority over peoples and territories, and how law influences the lives of people moving across the British empire. Marie-Andree Jacob is a socio-legal scholar whose work focuses on the competing claims of medicine, law and the modern nation-state. She has written on consent, medical regulation, and on how activities sit on the border between legality and illegality. Saksena and Jacob collaborated together on the *Making it to the Registers* comic along with researchers from the University of Bedfordshire and artists from the Petroglyphs studio in Canada.

Making New Families Visible: Co-creating Comics about Online Sperm Donation

Rhys Turner-Moore, Joe Jukes, Alice Lemkes, Francesca Taylor-Phillips, David Carless, Lucy Frith, Georgina Jones, Aleks Krotoski, Allan Pacey, Tanya Palmer

Online sperm donation refers to websites, apps or social media groups that are designed to connect people seeking sperm ('recipients') with people offering sperm ('donors') outside of fertility clinics, or people who would like to conceive and co-parent together. In this presentation, we will discuss the development, content and dissemination of a collection of eight comic stories about online sperm donation, co-produced as part of a four-year, multidisciplinary research project – the Online Sperm Donation Project – funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC).

Drawing on narrative research interviews with recipients, donors, partners and co-parents, the multi-disciplinary academic team worked with people with lived experience and an illustrator to produce eight visual narratives. The resulting book, *New Families: Stories about Online Sperm Donation*, explores the diverse experiences of people forming and growing their families through this practice.

Over the course of the presentation, we will consider three questions relating to the theme of welfare: How might we create comics that attend to the welfare of the people who share their stories with us and of the team who bring those stories to life? What do comics of online sperm donation tell us about individual, relational, community or social welfare? And how can such comics be shared to support people involved in online sperm donation and promote wider recognition and understanding of this often-misunderstood route to conception?

Rhys Turner-Moore is a Professor in Psychology and Lead for the Sex, Sexualities and Sexual Harm research group at Leeds Beckett University and Principal Investigator for the ESRC-funded research, the Online Sperm Donation Project. The Project's resources, including a collection of comic stories, New Families: Stories about Online Sperm Donation, a short film, and a stakeholder briefing are all available for free download from the Project website. *New Families* is the first book of comic stories dedicated to online sperm donation and the first time the team has produced a book of comics.

Panel 2: Workshop

Madness in comics – knowing our own minds

Bill Penson

Madness, mental illness and psychosociological difference is a regular aspect of comic book stories whether in the mainstream publisher titles or indie publications. Stories involving madness can have a variety of meanings, satisfy cultural tropes or are storytelling devices. This workshop takes some of these ideas this and introduces participants to current critical thinking in the mental health field(s) and poses questions about the purpose and presence of madness in comic book stories and the extent to which is reflects problematic ideas or variably helpful orthodoxies. This discursive session will have some short information points presented, but will mainly use energising questions to help participants figure out their own positions on reading madness in comics, and invite them to re-assess these alongside critical approaches.

Dr Bill Penson is a Chartered Psychologist and a Senior Lecturer at Leeds Beckett University . His research interests have been in the critical medical humanities where health/clinical scholarship interacts with arts and humanities thinking. He is a lifelong comic book and sci-fi fan.

Panel 3: Children and Young People

‘The Innocent Seduced’ – A Creative Response to Wertham’s *Seduction of the Innocent*

Jonathan Macho

One of the most well-remembered speakers on comics and children’s welfare was psychiatrist Fredrick Wertham, with the proviso he argued the former was harmful to the latter. Wertham’s book, *Seduction of the Innocent* (1954), arrived at a time when comic books were at their most popular with America’s youth, and played a key role in their downfall by portraying them as causing illiteracy, modelling antisocial behaviour, and forcing diverse other harmful influences onto their readership. Early in my PhD, inspired by Tom Phillip’s *A Humument* (2016), I tried to counterpoint these claims by lifting Wertham’s words directly from his book and placing them onto comics pages. I titled this series of digital collages: ‘The Innocent Seduced’. The comics pages I chose fit into three criteria: the contemporary comics Wertham was attacking, later comics which were affected by the changes to the US industry following his book’s publication, and modern comics which demonstrate how things have developed in the decades since. In my paper, I will break down the aims of the project, what I have produced so far, and how each page can be read paratactically, that is, through the reader juxtaposing distinct words or images and interpreting connections between them to piece together a narrative. I will also touch upon the ways in which my own biases are apparent in the final collages, and how I hope to present a more nuanced portrayal of their subject and his values than I initially expected.

Jonathan Macho (he/him) completed his PhD in Creative and Critical Writing at Cardiff University in 2026. His thesis was centred on a prose novel which behaves like a comic book, bringing both mediums together through a process of stylistic remediation. His academic writing includes a review of *Spider-Man: Across the Spider-Verse* for the academic blog Fantasy/Animation and the chapter on *Doctor Who* comics and annuals for the *Routledge Handbook of Doctor Who*. He also has a substantial number of creative publications to his name, including a short story which appeared in *AHOY* comics and several spin-offs from *Doctor Who*.

The Welfare of the Reader

Nigel Kitching

Sonic the Comic was published from 1993 to 2002 and for much of this time I was working on the comic, writing stories for its relatively young audience.

As the writer, I aimed to create stories that were both engaging and powerful, and the response from readers suggests that I largely achieved that goal. However, while

undertaking a PhD by published work, I have revisited this writing and reassessed the impact it may have had on its audience.

This paper will look at examples of unintentional racism, arguable sexism and a potentially irresponsible attitude to the inclusion of violence. These issues are all the more problematic as some of the readership were as young as seven or eight.

I will discuss the reasons behind the choices I made and consider the implications of working in a collaborative medium. Therefore, the focus will be on how and why certain decisions were made and how they were possible in a comic published in the 1990s.

In light of my current perspective, I will reflect on what I might do differently if writing for a similar audience today.

Nigel Kitching began his career in advertising before becoming a full-time comic book writer and artist in 1989, initially drawing strips written by Neil Gaiman and Mark Millar. Kitching is best known for his work on *Sonic the Comic* but has also worked on many other comics including *2000AD* where he, with the artist Richard Elson, created the series *A.H.A.B.*. From 2007 to 2024 Kitching worked as a Senior Lecturer at Teesside University where he created several courses including an MA in Comics. He has now completed his PhD by published work.

DC Comics Says: "Be A Good Citizen!"

Brian M Clarke

Between 1949 and 1967 DC Comics published over 200 one-page comic strip Public Service Announcements (PSAs) across its range of titles. Published in partnership with the National Social Welfare Assembly (NSWA), the series promoted prosocial behaviours and values in young people. Created under the editorship of Jack Schiff, they foreground the importance of civic responsibility and democratic inclusion in the life of young readers. Under titles such as "People Are People" (equality), "Get Your Ticket to the Treasury of Books!" (using your library), "Touchdown for Picasso!" (art appreciation), "Not Wanted – High School Drop-out!" (continuing education), "Smoking is for Squares!" (personal health) and "How a Nation Is Born - Your United Nations at Work!" (international relations) evolving and traditional American values were presented in a Capraesque small town setting.

Many advertorials featured Buzzy, a teen boy of about 13, who delivered a message of the day, often helped by either Superboy or Superman. Adroitly avoiding political parties, the series addressed popular concerns of the period such as juvenile behaviour, social integration, America's role in the world and education.

Begun at a time of rising criticism of comic book content, the PSAs enabled DC Comics to present a redeeming side of comic book reading and the wholesomeness of the DC

product line. With the rise of the counterculture in the late 1960s, the messaging appeared overly paternal and the series was discontinued.

Brian is a comic book and magazine writer, editor and publisher with 30-plus years' professional experience. He is a PhD candidate at the University of Salford, where he researches the history of American comic strip adaptations of classic literary sources. He previously presented papers at the Leeds Comics Forum, on technology and comic book production, adaptations and embodiment. His next research project is the presentation of the American Civil War in newspaper strips, comic books and graphic novels.

Panel 4: Workshop

Building a Network: Webcomics for Wellbeing (W4W)

Francesca Benatti, Ernesto Priego and Natalie Divin

Young people are increasingly experiencing wellbeing difficulties, with 25.8% of 16-24 year olds reporting mental health conditions (NHS England, 2025). School-based wellbeing interventions have limited effectiveness due to their short nature (Schäfer, 2025). New approaches are needed to supplement existing programmes and provide longer-term support that young people can feel personally connected to.

Practitioners and scholars in the arts and humanities have long acknowledged the positive effect of arts, stories and creativity on the wellbeing of readers, authors and participants. Engagement with the arts has been shown as an effective "active ingredient" in the prevention of anxiety and depression in young people (Wellcome Trust, 2021). These readers are more likely to engage when choosing reading materials they consider enjoyable and tied to their own interests (National Literacy Trust, 2025).

Comics are one such medium. Previous studies within the field of ""Graphic Medicine"" have demonstrated that comics can effectively communicate health messages, making information more relatable and accessible (Priego and Farthing, 2020; McNicol, 2018). But is this benefit only limited to comics that directly address health, or can reading and creating comics, regardless of their content, improve wellbeing?

A network of webcomics stakeholders, such as readers, creators, curators and academics is needed to address these questions. This presentation invites Comics Forum participants to brainstorm with us. Questions that we would like to address include:

1. investigating to what extent reading and creating webcomics can enhance wellbeing
2. understanding how webcomics are read, discussed, created and shared, and how such participatory circuits can contribute to wellbeing

3. modelling new approaches and interventions to using webcomics to support better wellbeing
4. reaching out to healthcare and youth wellbeing charities and organisations

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Francesca Benatti (The Open University), Ernesto Priego (City St George's, University of London) and Natalie Divin (The Open University)

Francesca Benatti is Senior Research Fellow in Digital Humanities at The Open University. Her research interests range from book history to comics to hypertext to nineteenth-century Irish literature and periodicals. She uses digital approaches to study the Humanities and investigate digital cultures, texts and hypertexts through Humanities perspectives. Her most recent publication is *Innovations in Digital Comics* (Cambridge Elements, 2024), available open access at https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009319942.

Dr Ernesto Priego is a Senior Lecturer at the Centre for Human-Computer Interaction Design, and a co-director of the Data, Policy and Society MSc at City St George's, University of London, and editor and founder of The Comics Grid: Journal

of Comics Scholarship. As a researcher he has explored the implications of digital technologies on comics creation and consumption, as well as the role of comics as narrative, conceptual and speculative design tools and applies user-centred, participatory co-design methods to the creation of comics within public health or social interest domains. Ernesto led the "Parables of Care. Responses to Dementia Care" project (2017-2021), which explored the potential of comics to enhance the impact of dementia care research.

Thursday 12 November

Panel 5A: Health and Information

Visualising Welfare in Infographics and Comics About Health

John Miers

Negotiating the effects of illness or disability in diverse circumstances including interactions with formal healthcare institutions and private self-management produces a shifting set of approaches to the questions of whose welfare is at stake, what individuals or agencies bear responsibility for its maintenance, how it might be experienced, and what sources of authority adjudicate the suitability of attempts to conceptualise and manage welfare.

In parallel, visual communication about healthcare takes diverse approaches to these questions, which are signalled by the techniques of visual rhetoric they employ and their proximity to institutional or individual experiences of healthcare.

This paper examines how approaches to welfare are visually embedded by the rhetorical approaches commonly found in infographics, public information comics, and the typically more subjective stories that characterise the genre of graphic medicine.

Using a framework adapted from existing social semiotic analyses of data visualisations, I examine the three genres through their differing approaches to focalization, information management, and appeals to validating authority. I argue that the compositional, depictive and narrative techniques highlighted by this analysis embed the answers commonly given by each genre to the above questions.

Examples include infographics used by and within British and American hospitals, public information comics *Attack of the Ketones* (Revolve Comics, 2019) and *Through the MS Looking Glass* (UniVerse, 2025), and my recent comic co-authored with Erin la Cour, *Why Graphic Medicine?* (Vrije Universiteit Press,2026).

John Miers is Senior Lecturer in illustration at Kingston School of Art, London and a postdoctoral researcher in graphic medicine at the Vrije Universteit, Amsterdam. He is the author of *Visual Metaphor and Drawn Narratives* (Palgrave, 2026)

How to Get a Safe, Legal Abortion: Health Information and Rights Claims in *Abortion Eve*

Zoe L. Tongue

In 1973, following the legalisation of abortion by the US Supreme Court in Roe v. Wade, feminist underground comic creators Joyce Farmer and Lyn Chevli published *Abortion Eve*—an informational comic following five women as they navigate having a safe, legal abortion. This is an early example of Graphic Medicine, aimed at giving women knowledge of how to get an abortion and what the process would be like following over a century of criminalisation and clandestine abortion. In the absence of information aimed at abortion seekers, Farmer and Chevli's comic provided an accessible source of self-help. Beyond this, the comic also adopts a clearly pro-choice political stance which aims to combat abortion stigma and stake a clear claim to reproductive rights. The five women have their own reasons and circumstances for having an abortion, and each of them is met with compassion and support. However, while the legalisation of abortion was to be celebrated, the comic also offers a critique of the Supreme Court for not going far enough, and for placing the ultimate choice in the hands of legal, political, and medical decision-making rather than abortion seekers themselves. *Abortion Eve* demonstrates that wellbeing in the context of abortion cannot be disentangled from law and politics, and the motivations behind the comic—to empower abortion seekers and advance a feminist understanding of reproductive rights—are all the more relevant in the US today.

I am a Lecturer in Law at the University of Leeds, where I research reproductive rights issues in law and popular culture. I have written on these topics for academic and non-academic publications, and my first monograph, titled *Recognising a Human Right to Abortion*, will be published with Hart in October 2026. Earlier this year, I was a visiting scholar at the Library of Congress in Washington D.C., funded by the AHRC International Fellowship Scheme, for a project on representations of abortion law and rights in feminist alternative and underground comics.

Graphic Medicine, Visual Communication and Design

Ian Horton

When defining Graphic Medicine La Cour notes "Research in the field has largely focused on how comics can uniquely convey information about healthcare issues, treatments, and systems" and highlights the need for new kinds of narratives to explore the complexities of medical discourse (2022, pp 137-8). However, the focus on narrative and the affordances of comics when analysing examples of Graphic Medicine means that key visual communication and design devices used have received little academic attention. These devices include diagrammatic representations of parts of the body

such as the brain, heart or intestines and more informational elements such as graphs and directional arrows.

Building on design research methods developed by Noble and Bestley this paper will analyse a taxonomy of these visual communication devices using a corpus of sixteen Graphic Medicine comics produced by the Comics Studies Creative Research Hub at the University of Dundee as part of their Public Information and Educational Comics project. These comics take a range of approaches from the personal to the factual and informational. For example, *Close to the Heart* (2019) takes an autobiographical approach exploring the impact of heart disease on one specific family; in contrast *Fibromyalgia and Us* (2017) brings together many different experiences of this disease; whereas *The Brittle Bones Society – Celebrating 50 Years* (2019) takes a more historical perspective. Producing a taxonomy of the design devices used in comics taking such different approaches to Graphic Medicine allows for a new understanding of the complexities of visual communication in the field.

References

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La Cour E. "Graphic Medicine" in Grennan S., La Cour E. and Spanjers R. (2022). *Key Terms in Comics Studies*. Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan.

Ian Horton is Professor of Graphic Communication at University of the Arts London. His present research is focused in three related areas: comic books, graphic design and illustration. He is a founder member of the Comics Research Hub (CoRH!!) at the University of the Arts London, co-editor of *Contexts of Violence in Comics* (Routledge 2019) and *Representing Acts of Violence in Comics* (Routledge 2019) and is associate editor of the *Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics*. He has published *Seeing Comics through Art History: Alternative Approaches to the Form* (co-edited with Maggie Gray (Kingston University)) (Palgrave 2022) and *Art History for Comics: Past, Present and Potential Futures* (co-authored with Maggie Gray (Kingston University) (Palgrave 2022).

Panel 5B: Workshop

Cartooning as an Act of Self Care

Clari Searle

This workshop is for anyone who has an interest in supporting themselves or their students with a relaxed playful process to build funny styles and ideas for self-care. All drawing styles and wonderfully wonky doodles are welcome – you can expect zero judgement, plenty of encouragement, and a place to play.

This workshop explores the incidental discovery that cartooning can serve as an act of self-care for adults in higher education and beyond. This discovery emerged from my PhD research, which originally aimed to explore ways for adults to generate funny ideas for an A–Z guidebook. As the research developed, however, cartooning became a personal source of wellbeing, offering empowering ways to flip, subvert and reinvent difficult experiences. The practice supported me through lockdown, bereavement and redundancy.

Alongside this personal experience, I observed how university students used cartooning to support themselves, developing comic diaries and 'cartoon coaches' to champion their lives and academic work. These experiences suggest that cartooning can offer an accessible and playful approach to self-care. Requiring little more than a pen, paper and a willingness to doodle words and images, it can create powerful opportunities for reflection and reframing for present and future possibilities.

Workshop participants will experiment with some of the most popular and effective cartooning activities that emerged from these experiences, leaving with fun and practical tools that they can adapt for themselves or their students.

Clari Searle is a researcher and educator with 23 years of experience as a university teacher and teacher trainer working at universities including Hiroshima, Warwick and Coventry. Her doctoral research in comics studies education employs creative practice to explore how incongruity theory can be applied to generate humorous comics or 'funnies.' This research has culminated in an *A-Z guidebook of creative prompts* designed to help adult beginners to think and draw funny. Alongside her academic work, she facilitates workshops on cartooning, creative journalling, and comics for wellbeing.

Panel 6A: Methods

"I made this myself!" Re-acquainting creative writing students with the art of photocopying

Hannah Chapman

I teach creative writing students how to make comics. To their horror this process involves a lot of drawing; not out of any belief that comics must and should be authored by a sole creator, but as a means of accelerating the introduction of theory to the classroom. One of these ideas is that a comic is not a comic until it is in print or digitally published. I invite my students to interrogate this theory through the creation of diary comics. The work produced is funny, thoughtful, and authentic, exploring their lived experiences in unexpected ways.

My aim, as a lecturer, is not only to support my students in producing great writing but to help them see themselves as professional authors. In the context of comics, this

includes equipping them with the skills needed to self-publish. Printing and sharing their work gives students the opportunity to connect with other creators as peers, while reinforcing their sense of belonging within the community. The challenge has been overcoming their fear of failure and the fact so few of them grew up with a printer at home.

This paper will explore why reacquainting my students with the photocopier feels radical in a time where their assumed identities as "digital natives" can put them on the back foot. I'll also discuss life writing as a tool for building confidence in a new generation of writers how it can support increased representation within the comics industry.

Hannah K. Chapman is a writer and researcher specialising in poetry, graphic narratives and critical biography. She teaches at Bath Spa University where, among other things, she is the module leader for Writing Graphic Novels and Comics (Creative Writing, BA Hons). Hannah is the co-author of the award-winning *Why She Wrote: A Graphic History of the Lives, Inspiration, and Influence behind the Pens of Classic Women Writers* (Chronicle, 2021), the creator and editor of the award-nominated anthology series *Comic Book Slumber Party*, and was previously a co-organiser of Bristol Comic and Zine Fair (2013-2018).

Warfare and Welfare, Wellbeing and Self-Care in *Entropy: Red Snow*

Brian Fagence

In classical design storytelling, every synthesised element of the composition's articulation is a practice of dominant socio-cultural absorption. There is a manufacturing of ideas naturalised as to the way the world works and is supposed to be and behave.

In my storytelling practice, I make things up. Through these constructions, I very deliberately analyse orthodox portrayals of character, story-world, story-line and most importantly theme. I want to think about and feel my way through these classical storytelling components to explore these constructions, and as such how creative content can open up insight - and more and more into, in regard to wellbeing - into my, being, well.

I create stories often to explore and figure out my ideas about the world, me, and my relationship to it. My wellbeing however, cannot be revealed from this singular avenue only. Exploration and reflection of this are core to any practice-led research, and this talk will examine the story of Golau Kawareta, the primary protagonist in the prologue to *Entropy: Red Snow*. In this comics' creative practice, through his distressed and desperate trials, how I was able to also find a way into how the weight of the

construction of his story-world's fixed world-lies allowing me to observe and what this could reveal and examine in my own feelings of grief, sadness, and despair.

Through this practice-led research process I look at what am I making, and why am I making it, in order to reveal and analyse the constructed designs of health and wellbeing in my comics storytelling.

Brian Fagence is a lecturer in Critical Studies and Scriptwriting at the University of South Wales. He has been lecturing since 1998 and has published articles in the *Journal of Writing in Creative Practice*, *Studies in Comics* and the *International Journal of Creative Media Research*. His research interests include storytelling, scriptwriting and transmedia.

Drawings that listen, drawings that tell: exploring the potential of comics and reportage drawing in qualitative research with young athletes

Becky Palmer

This paper will focus on findings that emerged during the first phase of an ongoing collaboration between myself and Dr Francesca Cavallerio, Associate professor in qualitative sport psychology. Dr Cavallerio's research centres on the impact of coaching practices on the welfare of youth athletes, with a focus on early-specialisation sports. We first collaborated to make a comic that adapted a piece of creative non-fiction that Dr Cavallerio published, which communicated the findings of an ethnographic study of the psychosocial factors influencing the development of overuse injuries in rhythmic gymnastics.

Our aim in making the comic was to create a resource that would be not only another way to communicate the outcomes of Dr Cavallerio's research to a broader audience, but also a tool to use in further research with young gymnasts. Adapting the story and discussing that process gave rise to insights and further questions that this paper will outline. These include the different communicative potential that written non-fiction and comics afford; the challenges of representation when a story is told visually; trustworthiness, rigour and an awareness of the researcher as an interpreting presence through the hand-made quality of comics; and the possibility that observational drawing/reportage drawing could be used as a further method for data-collection.

Dr Becky Palmer is a Lecturer in Illustration with the MA Children's Book Illustration at Anglia Ruskin University, and an illustrator and author of comics and picturebooks. Becky's first book, *La Soupière Magique*, was published by Éditions Sarbacane in 2014. In 2016 she completed a PhD that used practice-based research to examine the relationship between comics and picturebooks as different forms for graphic narrative. Since then, she has made books with publishers including Walker Books and NoBrow and continues to pursue research

where practice is a central tool for investigation. She has also produced and contributed to various self-published works, exhibiting at comics fairs in the UK and internationally with illustrators' collective Brolly Lolly.

www.beckypalmer.co.uk

Panel 6B: Publics

The Personal, The Political, and The Professional: Lesbian HIV/AIDS Care Work in the Comics Medium

Cassia Hayward-Fitch

The usual way in which the AIDS crisis is told privileges the voices of gay men and relegates lesbians to the important but silent role of caregivers. However, lesbians did not quietly care for sick men but narrated their crucial role in the crisis across the media, including in comics. This paper analyses two such works: MK Czerwiec's *Taking Turns: Stories from HIV/AIDS Care Unit 371* (2017) and Kate Charlesworth's *Sensible Footwear: A Girl's Guide* (2019). These two graphic memoirs explore the care work lesbians provided HIV-positive men across the "Age of AIDS" (the time before effective HIV medication) within their professional capacities (Czerwiec's work details her time as a nurse on an HIV/AIDS ward) and personal activism (detailed in Charlesworth's memoir). This paper argues that by recording this history, these memoirs both recount the roles lesbians historically played in HIV/AIDS care work and serve as sources of contemporary care work, passing down memories of the deceased to younger generations of readers who did not live through the crisis. This paper assesses how these two authors use the comic medium to emotively recount and reenact lesbian HIV/AIDS care work. It argues that their approach differs from gay male discussions of the crisis, which focus on their fears of catching the virus and its impact on their sexual identities. The paper thus posits that these two graphic memoirs portray distinctly lesbian gazes on HIV/AIDS.

Cassia Hayward-Fitch (she/her) is a visiting research fellow at the University of East Anglia, Norwich, UK, from whom she received a PhD in American Studies in June 2025. Her doctoral thesis was awarded the Comics Scholars Society Dissertation Prize 2026. She is the 2025 recipient of the International Graphic Novel and Comics Conference's Sabin Award for Comics Scholarship and the 2023 recipient of the International Comic Arts Forum's Lent Scholarship in Comics Studies. She has been published in the *Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics* (September 2026), the *Journal of Lesbian Studies* (March 2026), *Closure* #12 (March 2026), and the *International Journal of Comic Art*, vol. 25, No. 1, Spring/Summer 2023.

Make America Healthy again: Hate, Humor, and Wellbeing in StoneToss Cartoons

Mihaela Precup

This presentation examines a selection of webcomics by a popular far-right cartoonist who has been publishing them online since 2017 under the pseudonym StoneToss. Comedy is the main mode of his sexist, racist, homophobic, transphobic, and antisemitic content camouflaged under a cute aesthetic, with simple lines and colorful backgrounds. His work is followed by over 500,000 people on X and over 100,000 people on Facebook and Instagram, but his X posts produce the most engagement, partly due to the open support of X owner, Elon Musk, who helped the cartoonist when his real name was revealed in 2024.

StoneToss has self-identified as a healer of contemporary United States, and described his comics as "sigils of psychic disinfectant disguised as 'comics.'" In this presentation, I am interested in those comics where the cartoonist explicitly attempts to heal America, either figuratively (from perceived corrupt foreign elements) or literally (in comics that address various health crises and other health-related issues faced by the American public). Harking back to a familiar Nazi rhetoric that regarded the extermination of Jews as a public health service, these images attempt to warn the (white) American public against the consumption of specific "ethnic" food, such as burritos or tacos, but also suggest that the moral fabric of the United States has been contaminated by irrational woke double-standards and policies. In comics that depict a vulnerable white population assaulted by foreigners and irrational wokeness, trans suicide becomes a punchline and violence against minorities is depicted with the humor of a creator who appears to believe he is not punching down, but up. I intend to examine these comics as strategies of mainstreaming far-right views (Schmid 2025), where humor has become an essential component of a broader online hate culture (Fielitz and Ahmed 2021), and where "cute" aesthetics (Dale 2017) are used to cover up violence and dehumanization.

Mihaela Precup is Associate Professor in the American Studies Program at the University of Bucharest, where she teaches American visual and popular culture, contemporary American literature, and comics studies. She is the author of The *Graphic Lives of Fathers: Memory, Representation, and Fatherhood in Autobiographical Comics* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2020). Her latest publication is "Graphic Storytelling and the Construction of Multidirectional Memory Spaces in Ali Fitzgerald's Drawn to Berlin: Comic Workshops in Refugee Shelters and other Stories from a New Europe" (*Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics*, 17(4)/2025).

Curating Graphic Medicine as Public, Relational and Participatory Practice: Reflection on Healing Panels

Jiahao Ji & Catherine Li

Graphic Medicine has received increasing attention communicating lived experiences, yet scholarship has concentrated largely on private reading, healthcare education and academic analysis, with less attention to what happens when graphic medicine enters exhibitions and is encountered by public (Alberda,2021). Through a reflective empirical case study and practical experience, this paper asks how curatorial and participatory practices can create community accessibility through which graphic medicine moves from lived experience and academic research toward shared knowledge and relational care, while approaching mental health beyond a clinical environment and involving stakeholders.

The paper examines the Healing Panels programme at Lewisham Arthouse. The exhibition brought doctoral research into a local public space, exploring whether collaboratively creating metaphorical comics can foster self-care. It included comics reading, co-creation workshops and publicly visible feedback, aiming to build communities around metaphorical comics and empower visitors through comic creation. It also tested a model in which artists and therapists collaborate through art therapy to support the community.

Drawing on dialogical aesthetics (Kester,2013), narrative humility (Shapiro,2011), and co-design, the paper examines accessibility as a curatorial condition comprising three interrelated forms: dialogical, epistemic, and participatory access. Dialogical aesthetics frames access through listening and exchange; narrative humility approaches lived experience as complex knowledge beyond clinical reduction; and co-design positions stakeholders as active contributors to the comic exhibition-making. Together, these frameworks position curating Graphic Medicine as a practice of public knowledge-making that enables reciprocal knowledge exchange and informs academic research in return.

Jiahao Ji is a PhD research student at Kingston University. Her research focuses on enhancing the therapeutic potential of visual metaphors and comics to improve mental health. Currently, she is developing a visual intervention method and accompanying guidance booklet for creating and recreating metaphorical comics, designed to support daily emotional self-care for individuals with anxiety. Her practice-based research emphasizes co-creation. She works closely with art therapists, mental health professionals, and individuals facing mental health challenges.

Catherine Li is a London-based curator working across exhibitions, public programmes, participatory practice and publishing. She works at Public Programme at University of the Arts London and is Chapel Curator at Brompton Cemetery.

Drawing Care: Welfare, Gender Justice, and Survivor-Centred Storytelling in Postmillennial Indian Comics

Partha Bhattacharjee and Barnana Baidya

This paper does not view welfare in terms of state provision purely, rather, it shows how Indian comics perform as cultural technologies of care. Through examining postmillennial Indian comics like, *Hush*, *Priya's Shakti*, *Priya and the Lost Girls*, and *Drawing the Line*, the paper argues that these graphic narratives have facilitated awareness of issues such as, gender-based violence and legal education. This article posits that modern Indian comic books and graphic narratives act as cultural systems of support as they democratize the notion of welfare from being merely a concern of the government to include issues of care and advocacy, legal literacy, and support systems. Within the mélange of feminist ethics of care, visual storytelling and trauma studies, the paper investigates how visual narratives created by comic art enable the formation of survivor-centric stories that aim to fight gender-based violence.

Partha Bhattacharjee serves as an Associate Professor of English and Media Studies at SRM University AP, Andhra Pradesh, India. He has been working on Comics Studies and Graphic Narratives since 2016 (Scopus Id: 57208188001; ORCiD: 0000-0003-1581-0076). He is a recipient of the "Giner de los Ríos grant" (2026 - 2027) as a Visiting Researcher in University of Alcalá, Spain. His research interests include Comics of the Global South, South Asian Comics, Comics and Gender Studies, Non-fictional Comics, Comics and Communication.

Barnana Baidya is a Research Scholar at SRM University AP under the supervision of Dr Partha Bhattacharjee (1st May 2024 – ongoing). She is a Recipient of the Charles Wallace India Trust Short Term Research Grant 2026-2027. She works at the intersection of comics studies and gender studies. She completed her Master of Arts in English from West Bengal State University and earned her Bachelor of Arts from the University of Calcutta. She is generally interested in reading, writing, and talking about Gender violence in South Asian literary narratives and visual representations of violence and trauma, among others.

Between Welfare and Amnesia: On the Remembrance of the Eastern Front in George Drăgan and Alexandru Talambă's *Elabuga* (2011)

Dragos Manea

On August 23rd 1944, King Michael I of Romania—with the backing of Romanian political parties, including the Communist Party—orchestrated a coup d'état against Ion Antonescu, the country's Nazi-aligned authoritarian leader, ultimately switching sides in World War II. Nevertheless, as Soviet forces marched into Romania, more than 120,000 soldiers were taken as prisoners of war, adding to the more than 100,000 Romanian

soldiers already captured on the Eastern Front (Harward 2024). After the war, the experiences of Romanian prisoners of war—and the Eastern Front more broadly—were not memorialized in the now Socialist Republic of Romania; across popular media, emphasis was placed on anti-Nazi warfare and anti-regime resistance. This allowed for a strange kind of memorial welfare, preserving a sense—well into the 21st century—of Romanian righteousness in World War II and obfuscating both the suffering of Romanian prisoners of war and the many crimes perpetrated by the Romanian army on the Eastern Front (such as the 1941 Odessa massacre of Jewish civilians).

In this paper, I explore George Drăgan and Alexandru Talambă's *Elabuga* (2011), the first—and only—mass-market Romanian comic book to depict the experiences of prisoners of war in the Soviet Union. In conversation with David Rieff and Mihaela Precup, I am particularly interested in the way in which the comic performs both an act of remembrance and an act of amnesia. Stylistically influenced by Mike Mignola's Hellboy, *Elabuga* recounts the ordeals of a fictional German soldier in a hellish Soviet prisoner-of-war camp, memorializing German suffering, while refusing to engage with the experiences of actual Romanian prisoners of war. The comic further draws on the Christian logic of Romanian fascism—each chapter page contains a quotation from the Bible; the German soldier ultimately rediscovers Christianity—creating an artwork that both challenges and acquiesces to the diktats of post-WWII Romanian historiography, revealing the paradox of its particular blend of memorial welfare: *Elabuga* can only gesture towards Romanian suffering by displacing it from Romanian history.

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Dragoş Manea is a lecturer in the American Studies Program at the University of Bucharest, where he teaches courses in contemporary American literature, cultural memory studies, perpetrator studies, and media studies. His main research interests include the adaptation of history, cultural memory, and the relationship between ethics and fiction. Relevant publications include *Religious Narratives in Contemporary Culture: Between Cultural Memory and Transmediality* (edited with Maria Sabina Draga-Alexandru, Brill, 2021) and *Reframing the Perpetrator in Contemporary Comics: On the Importance of the Strange* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2022).

Comics Infrastructures and the Production of Community in the Andean Region

Andrea Aramburú

In the context of my postdoctoral project "Reframing the Bicentenary: National Imaginaries and Contemporary Comics in Peru and Bolivia," I spent two months doing fieldwork in Peru and Bolivia researching how imaginaries of commemoration (including national, mythical and institutional) affect comics production. One aspect of the project observed how different "comics infrastructures" (archives, libraries, workshops) impacted the production and circulation of these imaginaries. I conducted interviews with different comics workers, including the administrator of a "comicteca" (comics library) in Cusco (Peru), a member of a collective that has an itinerant zine archive, also in Cusco (Peru); the owner of a radical literature and graphic narrative library in La Paz (Bolivia); and a representative of a comics archive currently held in a council library in Santa Cruz (Bolivia). In this presentation, I will share an overview of these conversations, arguing that in contexts where there is a lack of a comics industry and both funding and support tend to be limited, the limits between institutional and independent production become diffuse, creating a particular expression of community that while making use of some state infrastructure, remains broadly precarious and primarily relies on self-organisation.

Andrea Aramburú (she/her) is a Leverhulme Early Career Fellow (2025–28) at The University of Manchester. She has a PhD in Latin American Studies from the University of Cambridge, a MA in Contemporary Literature, Culture and Theory from King's College London and a BA in Hispanic Literature from Pontificia Universidad Católica del Perú. She is a comics scholar with a focus on feminist, decolonial, and queer approaches. Andrea is co-editor of the book *Comics and The Global South: Methodologies from and within Majority Worlds* (Leuven University Press 2026) and is currently working on her first monograph, forthcoming with Edinburgh University Press.

Panel 7B: Workshop

Create a short comic on negative experiences you have had with a health professional or system

Lily Chaplin

Join me for an interactive workshop where you draw a short comic or snippet of an experience they have had with the healthcare system or a professional who made you feel unseen or failed in any way. I will be sharing a couple of pages from my graphic novel in progress 'Diary of A Double Life' where I show my personal experience in an adolescent psychiatric ward. I will also have print out references from artists who have depicted mental health through art for inspiration. Through prompts you will make your

own short comic or snippet from your own personal experience with the healthcare system. Don't forget to bring your paper and pens!

I studied Illustration and Animation at the University for the Creative Arts in Canterbury (2019-22). I currently attend public programs at the Royal Drawing School and have been doing short courses since 2023. I am currently writing and illustrating my debut graphic novel, *Diary of A Double Life*, where I will be sharing my experiences of growing up in a very dysfunctional family and having to navigate the mental health and care system as a teenager. As well as expressing the many failings they have on young people.

I have always had a passion for observing the world around me and wanting to express my experiences through my art, not only for myself but for others who may be experiencing similar things to me. I want to use my creative practice to raise awareness of mental health, and the struggles people have.

This year I worked on an illustrative commission for the charity 'Words Matter,' where I drew ten portraits and had a quote from interviews where people said the best and worst things that were said to them as a child that have been carried into adulthood. I have also recently become a trustee of the charity 'Northern Bridge Productions,' where they focus on creativity against addiction. I am planning a series of artistic workshops to help people in need.

Panel 8A: Reflecting on Welfare

What happens to the children after the heroes have saved the day?

Joel Thurman

Superhero comics are no stranger to child trauma and parental death. Yet, the institutions designed to respond to vulnerable children frequently remain outside of the comic book's narrative. This paper examines three instances in which DC Comics explicitly brings child welfare services and foster care into its fictional universe. In *Batman: Gotham Knights* #45 (2003), Bruce Wayne is investigated by child services; the New 52's *Justice League* (2011) reimagines the SHAZAM! Family as a group home for foster children; and lastly, Duke Thomas experiences foster care in *We Are Robin* (2015) before becoming a superhero called the Signal. Drawing upon my dissertation research on the history and representation of foster youth in superhero comics, I examine how these narratives conceptualize welfare, family, institutional authority, and youth agency. Each case presents a different relationship between the superhero and systems of care. Taken together, these examples reveal a tension at the center of superhero narratives about vulnerable youth: although superheroes frequently intervene when children are endangered, comics have historically imagined extraordinary individuals as the guardians of the vulnerable rather than public systems of welfare. In these rare

instances when the welfare system is brought into focus, readers can ask: What happens to children after the heroes have saved the day?

Joel W. Thurman, Ph.D., is an emerging media and comics scholar whose research examines representations of orphans and vulnerable youth in American popular culture. His work explores the intersections of superhero comics, cultural history, and the American child welfare system with particular attention to how narratives of orphanhood reflect ideas about family, resilience, individualism, and heroism. He and his wife are foster and adoptive parents and live near the mountains of Colorado in the United States.

Welfare before Welfare: indecency, media and pleasure at The Gaiety Theatre in January 1872

Simon Grennan

London, The Gaiety Theatre, Aldwych. January 1872. A stage adaptation of Anthony Trollope's novel *Ralph the Heir*, pirated by his friend Charles Reade, garnered comments of indecency in the press. It was quickly followed on stage by *Thespis, or The Gods Grown Old*, the first operetta of Gilbert & Sullivan, largely featuring the same cast. Around the corner, the same month, cartoonist and actor Marie Duval published a 'vulgar' comic strip in *Judy, or the London Serio-Comic Journal*. It was titled *Revenge – a Tragedy*.

The media charge of indecency is contextualised by the perceived vulnerability to seduction of The Gaiety's audiences, much as the charge of vulgarity levelled at Duval's drawings focused upon the vulnerability of her readers. This concept of vulnerability had at its heart a conflation of older ideas of the safety, happiness and social value of media users with media itself, locating individual responsibility relative to institutional and state responsibilities to citizens.

This relationship between society and its members still underwrites 20th century transformations of ideas of individual and public good, in public media discourse, from broad concepts of societal well-being into the narrower, stigmatised label for means-tested state-supported financial aid: welfare.

This paper will unfold a series of personal and professional connections and disconnections in the London of the Strand, Holborn and Fleet Street in January 1872, to focus historical concepts of pleasure through the lens of the moral contradictions and imperatives of the mid-Victorian performance and visual entertainments industry.

Dr Simon Grennan is an awarded scholar of visual narrative and graphic novelist. He is Professor of Art and Design and Associate Dean for Research and Innovation at the University of Chester, UK. Dr Grennan is author of *Thinking about Comics* (Bloomsbury 2027), *Thinking about Drawing* (Bloomsbury 2022), *A Theory of*

Narrative Drawing **(Palgrave 2017),** ***Drawing in Drag by Marie Duval*** **(Book Works 2018) and** ***Dispossession*** **(Cape, 2015, one of The Guardian Books of the Year 2015). He is co-author and editor of** ***Infrastructures for Comics: New Global Paradigms of Comics Production and Use*** **(British Academy 2027),** ***Key Terms in Comics Studies*** **(Palgrave 2022) and co-author of** ***Marie Duval, Maverick Victorian cartoonist*** **(MUP 2020),** ***Marie Duval*** **(Myriad 2018) and** ***The Marie Duval Archive*** **(www.marieduval.org). Since 1990, he has been half of international artists team Grennan & Sperandio, producer of over forty comics and books. He is Principal Investigator for the research project** ***Marie Duval presents Ally Sloper: the female cartoonist and popular theatre in London 1869-85*** **(2014–16) and Co-investigator of** ***Remediating Stevenson: Decolonising Robert Louis Stevenson's Pacific Fiction through Graphic Adaptation, Arts Education and Community Engagement*** **(2022–25), both funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council UK.**
www.simongrennan.com

Panel 8B: Resilience

Imagining optimistic futures as an act of resilience

Viraj Joshi

In a world where technology comes with narratives of inevitability, and the future increasingly feels like a threat; imagining otherwise is a form of resilience and reclamation. The form of comics is a natural way of expressing the 'otherwise', and a greatly potent mode of imagining alternative objects, interactions, environments, that make up entire systems. Through excerpts from *Eliza - The Ghost in Every Machine*, a Speculative Design and Fiction project, that critiques technological status quo and imagines better alternatives; Viraj shall demonstrate his speculative design process, and how entire new worlds can begin with drawings and imagination.

Viraj Joshi is a futures designer. He works a Design Lead for Futures, Service, Interaction Design at Fjord (Now Accenture Song); and is a Visiting Tutor for Speculative and HMI Design at the Royal College of Art and Imperial College, London; and the author of ***Eliza - The Ghost in Every Machine*****. He has received several international accolades including work shown at the Science Museum London, United Nations DPPA, London Design Festival, Milan Design Week, and various comic conventions and stores around the world.**

False Hopes and Fantasies: Shōjo Connection as Means of Endurance in Arina Tanemura's *Full Moon o Sagashite* (2002–4)

Sarah Jessica Darley

This paper will explore the negotiation of 'voice' as a means of constructing harmful artifice and/or establishing shōjo connections—with 'voice' tied intrinsically to the

heroine's will to live—in Arina Tanemura's popular shōjo manga *Full Moon o Sagashite* (2002–4). Marketed as a mahō shōjo (magical girl) manga series both domestically and in translation, *Full Moon* offers a narrative of bodily transformation divorced from 'battle' for humankind rooted in the genre's 'beautiful fighting girl' origins (Tamaki, 2011). Instead, as US distributor Viz summarises, the story of *Full Moon* sees 'two Shinigami [the Japanese equivalent of an angel of death or grim reaper] grant a dying girl her wish to become a pop star and find her lost love.' Mitsuki, the girl in question, is twelve years old and has a large tumour pressing against her vocal chords when the Shinigami appear and tell her she has only one year left to live. Striking a deal with the Shinigami, Mitsuki promises to go with them peacefully in exchange for their help achieving her dream of being a singer and reuniting with her first love. This prompts Mitsuki's transformation into the mahō shōjo form of 'Full Moon', a healthy sixteen-year-old version of herself who gives Mitsuki the chance to both achieve her dreams and experience a facsimile life beyond her predestined death. These conditions initiate *Full Moon* as a simple, sentimental, and tragic story with a clear quest to follow and an unavoidable end, one that ostensibly follows shōjo sensibilities with little intervention to the mahō shōjo mode. However, this anticipated frame is ultimately a tenuous and fragile artifice predicated upon Mitsuki and the narrator's omission and rejection of reality. When the frame is broken, *Full Moon* expresses the dangers of superficial escapism as a means to avoid confronting grief, trauma, and depression; instead advocating for the expression of emotions and the seeking of human connection as a means to endure.

Sarah Jessica Darley (She/Her) is a Visiting Researcher at the University of East Anglia, where she completed her PhD thesis: *'Like the Wild Beasts, She Lives Without a Future': Fairy Tale and the Afterlives of Angela Carter*. Her first publication - 'The Magical Girl Mirror: Reflections and Transcultural Transformations of Euro-American Fairy Tales in the Mahō Shōjo Genre' - can be found within *Cross-Cultural Influences Between Japanese and American Pop Cultures: POWERS OF POP* (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2023), surveying the complex cultural dialogue between Euro-American fairy tales and the mahō shōjo genre of Japanese media. Sarah's research focuses upon the fairy tale, children's literature, visual media, reception theory, and gender studies.