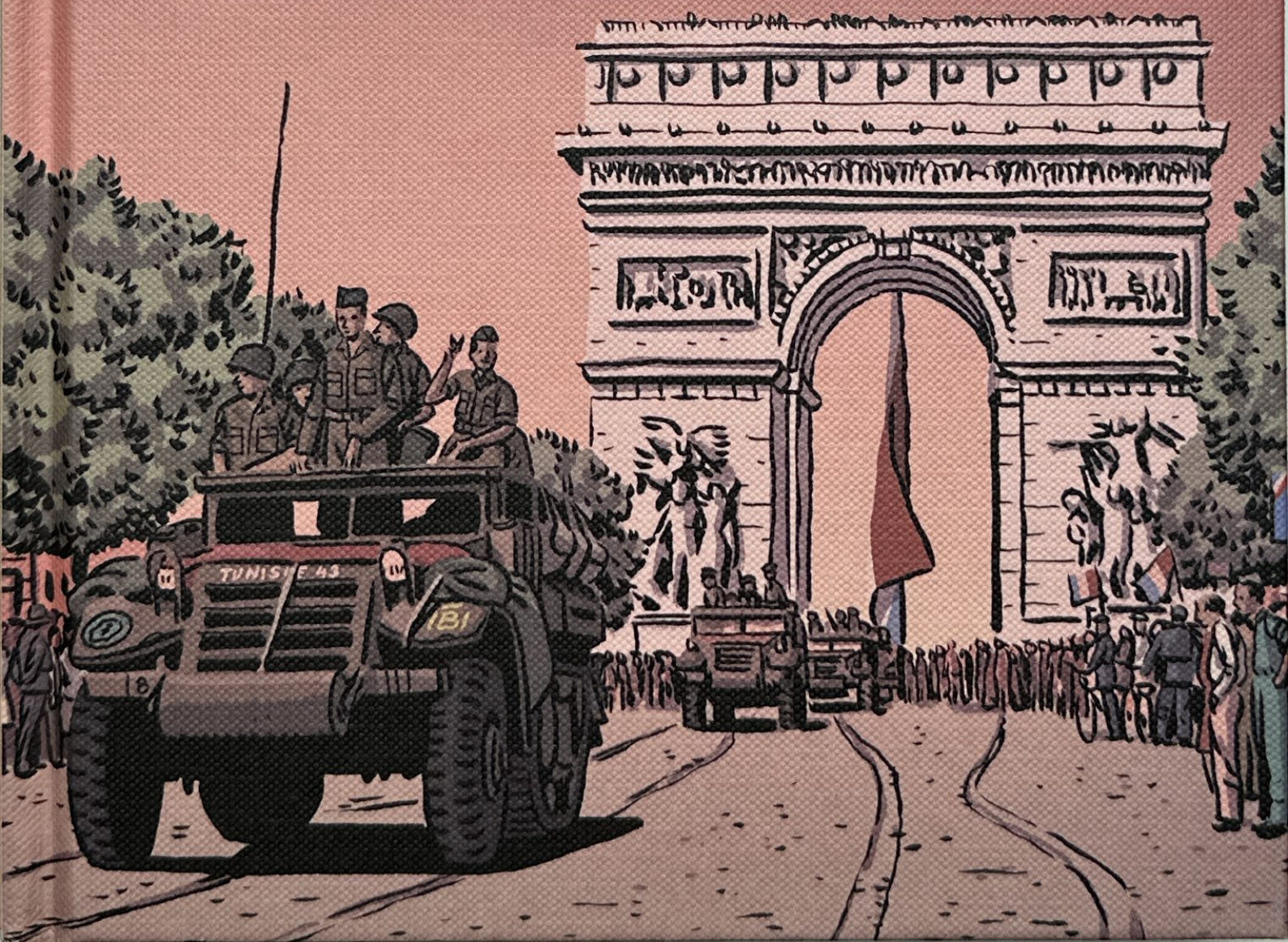


TWISTS OF FATE

PACO ROCA

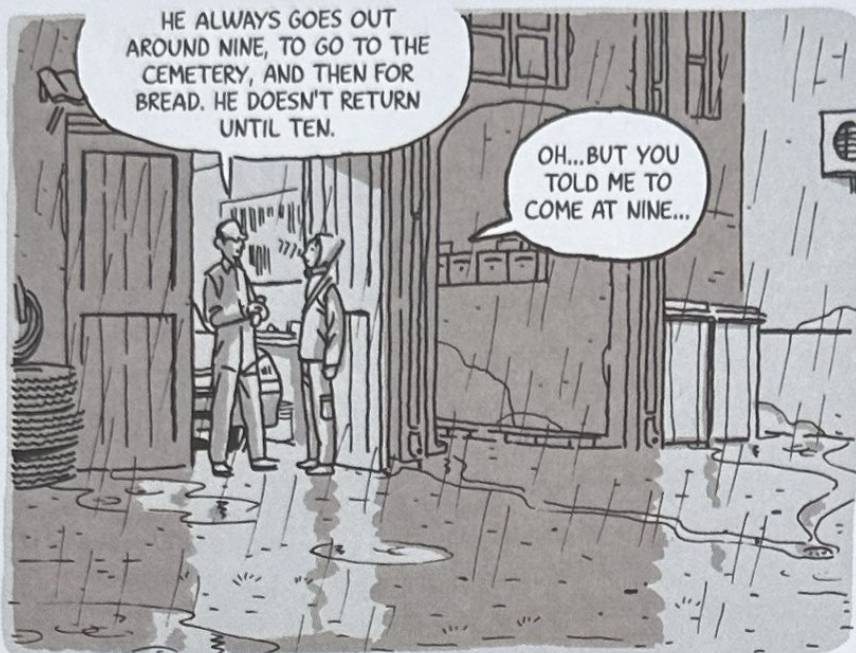






I'M LOOKING FOR MIGUEL RUIZ.

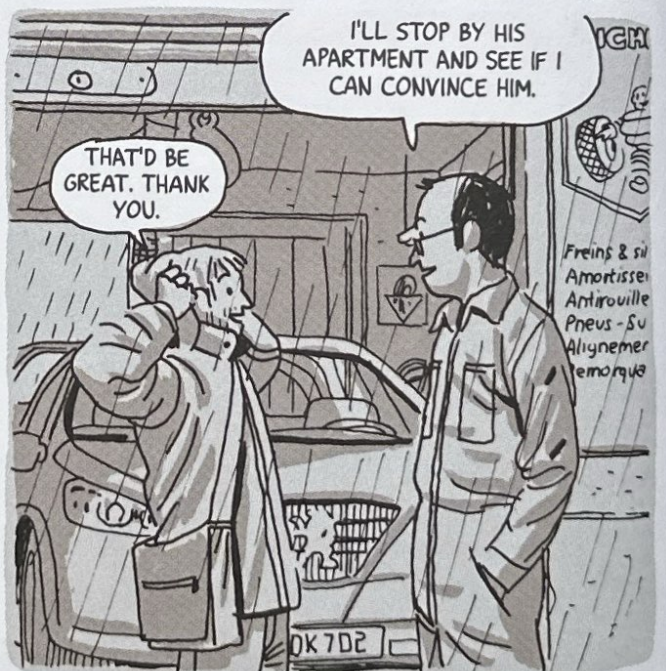


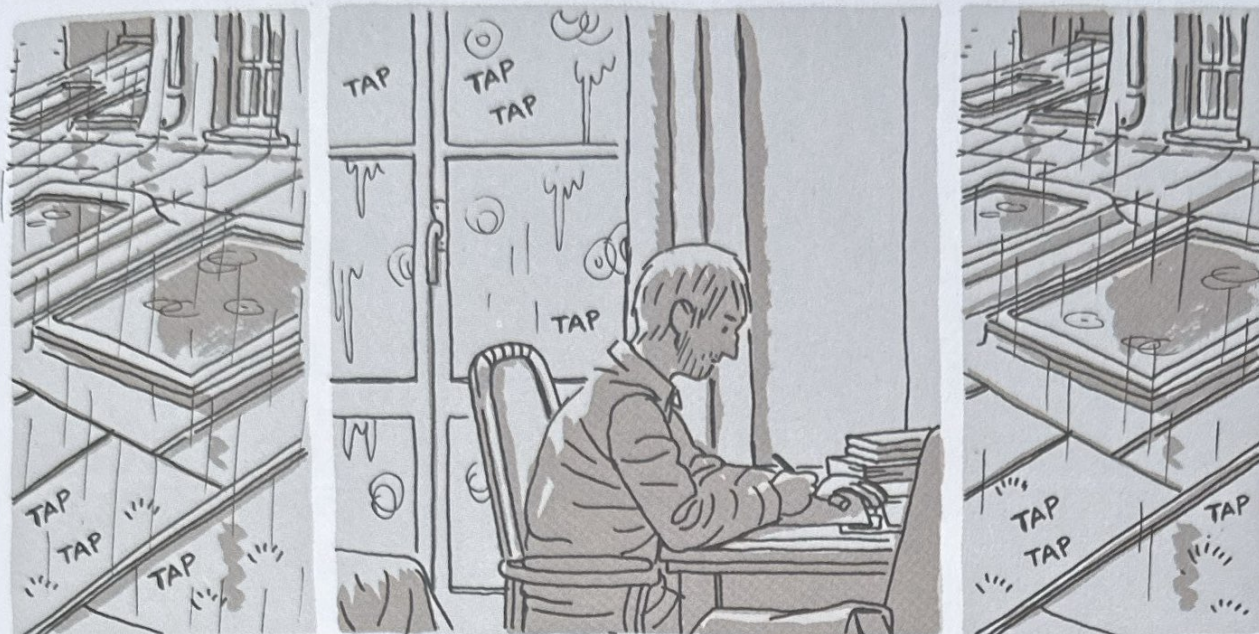




AND YOU THINK THAT POOR MIGUEL FOUGHT AGAINST THE NAZIS? HE COULD FLAY THEM WITH HIS TEMPER, BUT I CAN'T SEE HIM ACTUALLY FIGHTING.









SPLASH



THAT FASCIST WARSHIP IS GOING TO TAKE US OUT.



TO PORT!



SPLASH

NOBODY MOVE, OR THE BOAT WILL CAPSIZE!



CHAPTER II
WEDNESDAY / EXILE



...HE'LL BE BACK ANY MINUTE NOW.

THANK YOU SO MUCH FOR CONVINCING HIM, ALBERT.



HOW'D IT GO?

IT WASN'T EASY, TO TELL YOU THE TRUTH. BUT IN THE END, HE AGREED TO TALK WITH YOU FOR A LITTLE WHILE.

HE CAN BE GRUMPY, YOU'LL SEE.



HE LIVES ALONE, SO I LOOK AFTER HIM. I DO THE SHOPPING, GET HIS MEDICINE...

I'M LIKE A SON TO HIM.



HE DOESN'T HAVE ANY FAMILY?

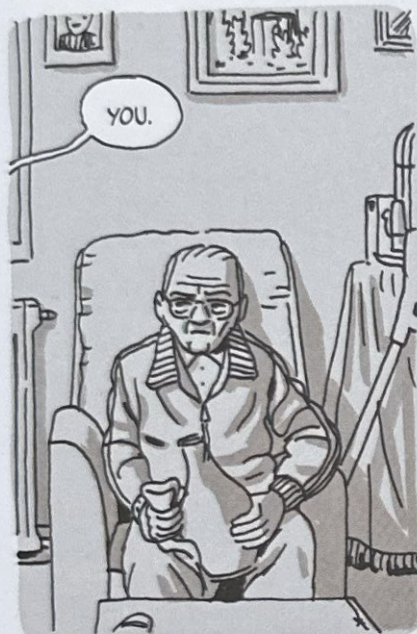
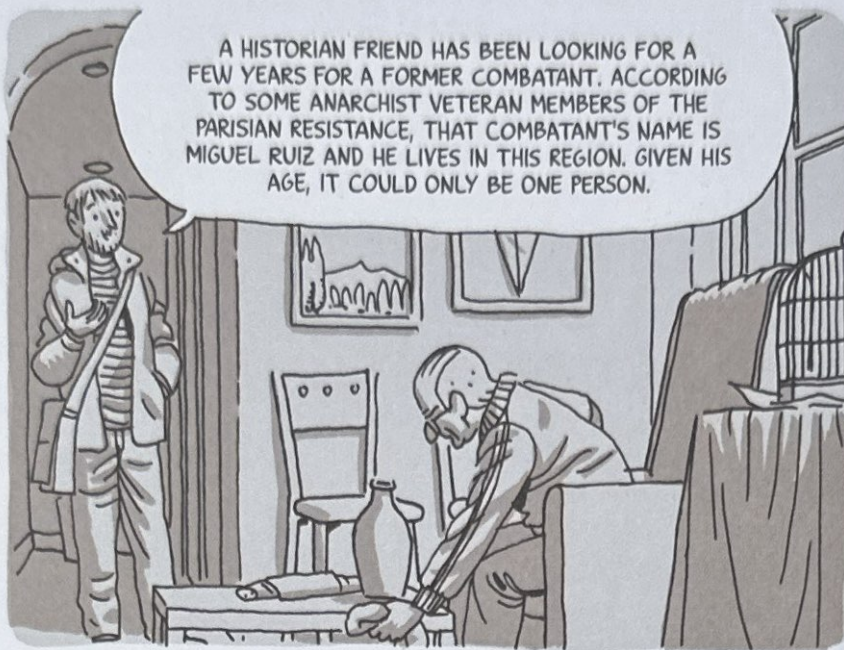
NOT THAT I KNOW OF. HE'S ALWAYS BEEN ALONE.

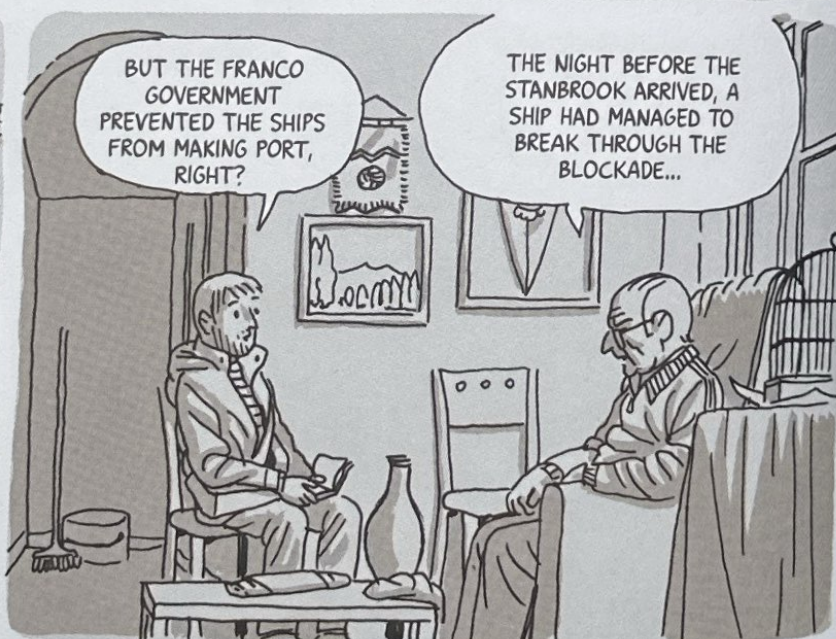
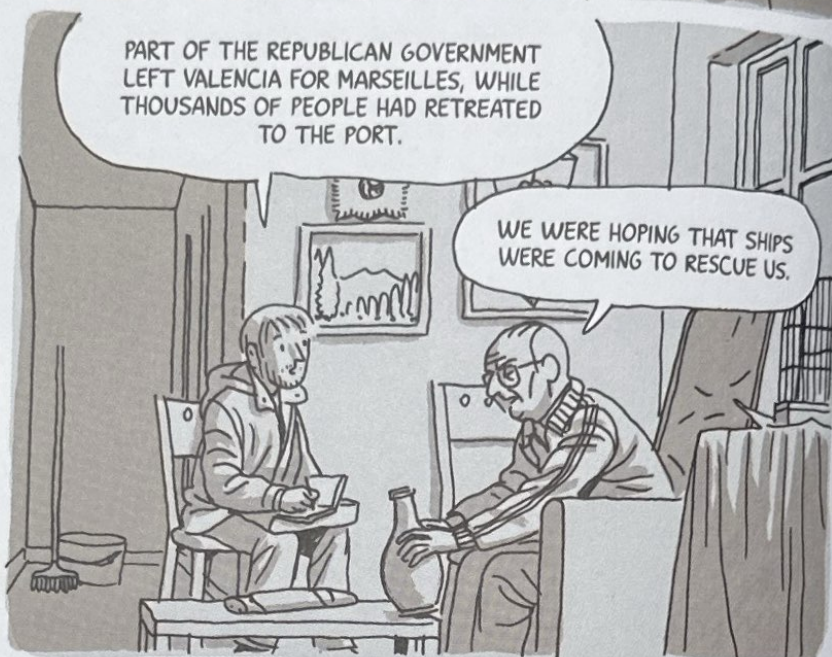


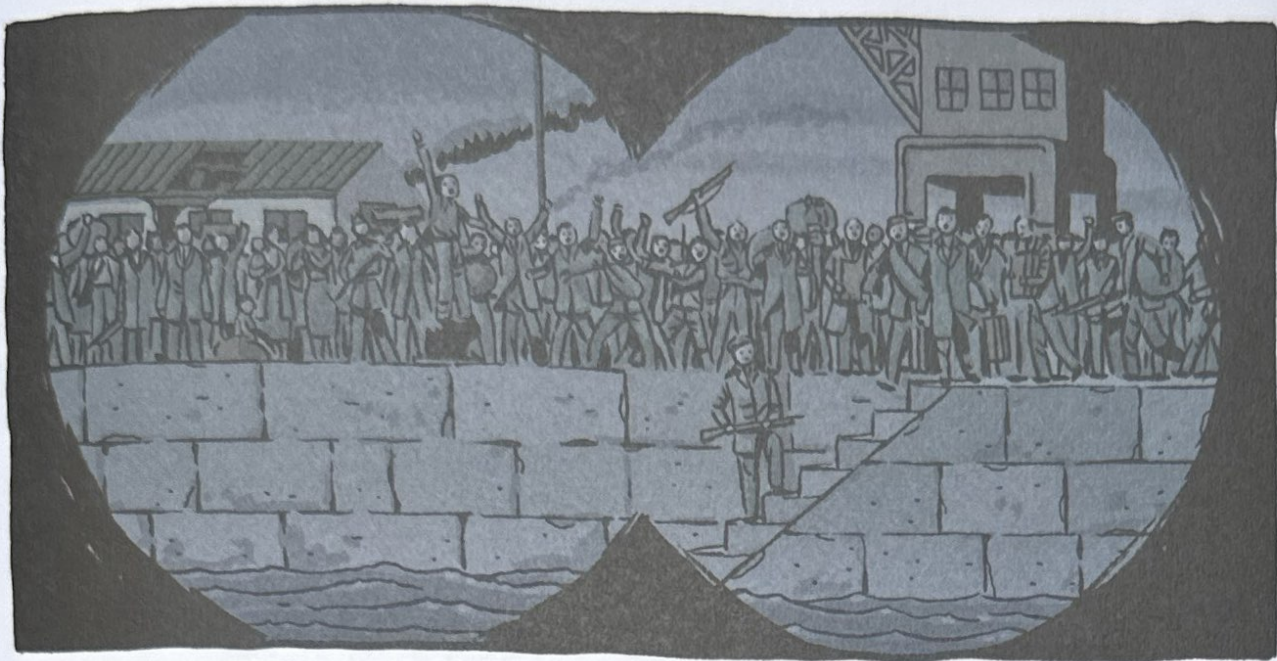
THERE HE IS.











FOR A NUMBER OF DAYS, ONLY THAT ONE SHIP WAS ABLE TO MAKE IT TO PORT, BUT WHEN THE CAPTAIN SAW ALL THOSE PEOPLE THERE HE DIDN'T DARE DOCK. HE TURNED AROUND AND LEFT.



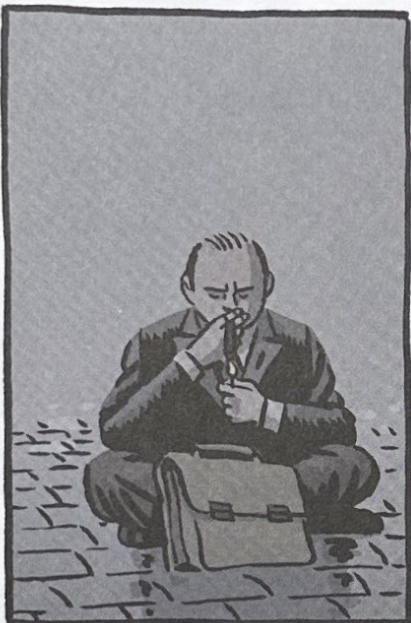
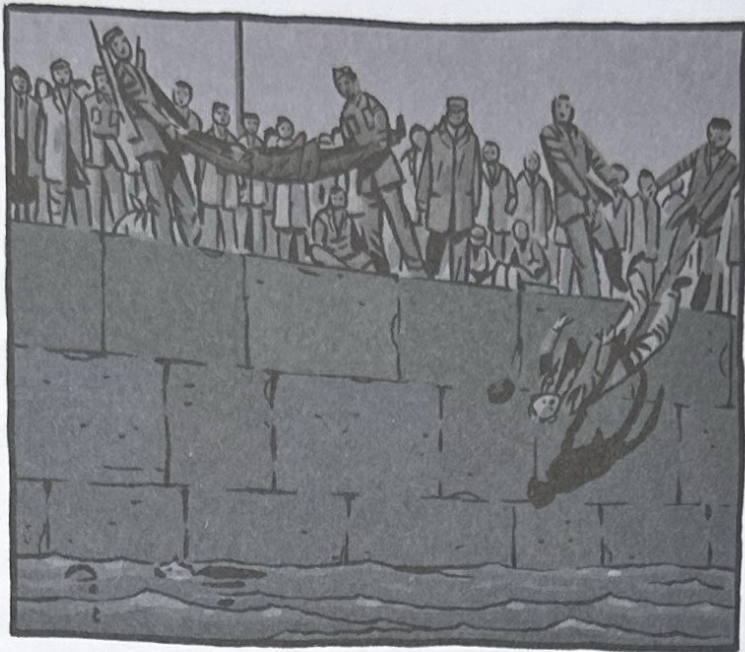
AND THERE WERE NO OTHER SHIPS UNTIL THE STANBROOK? AND WHAT ABOUT AFTER? WERE THERE MORE SHIPS?

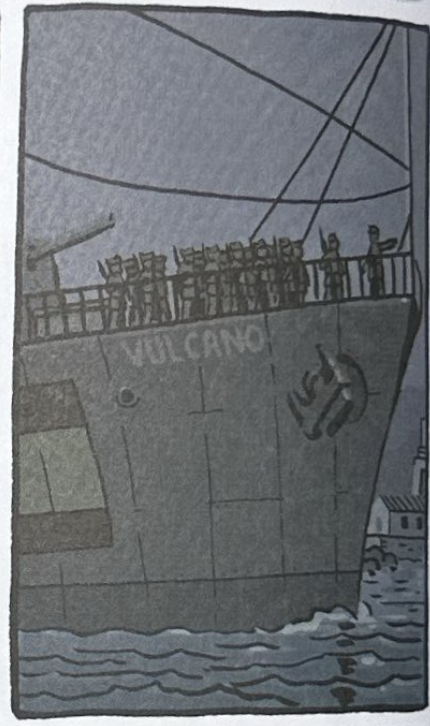
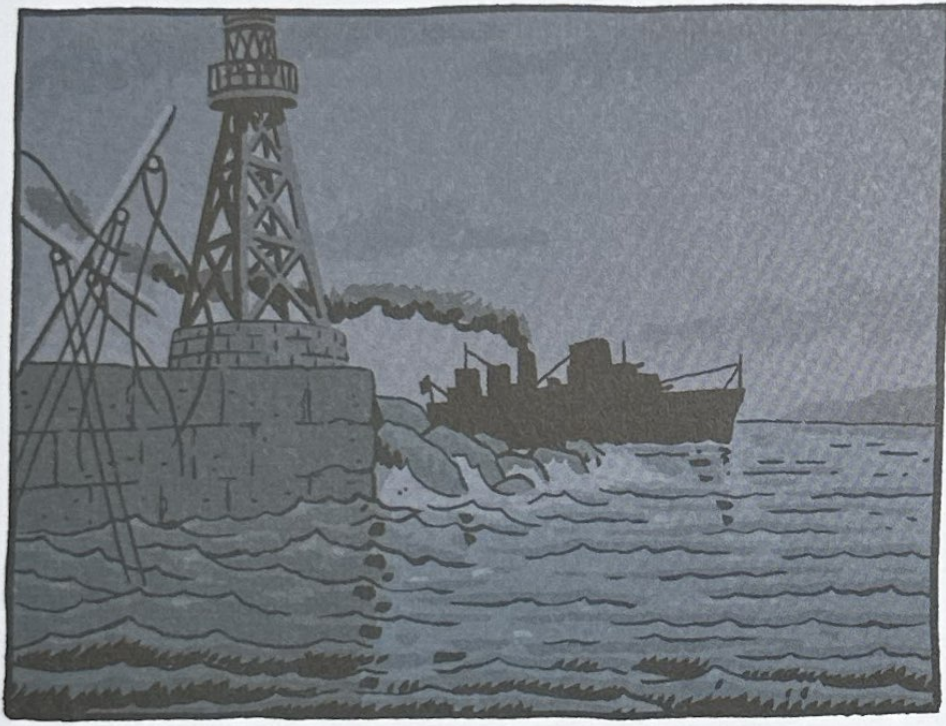
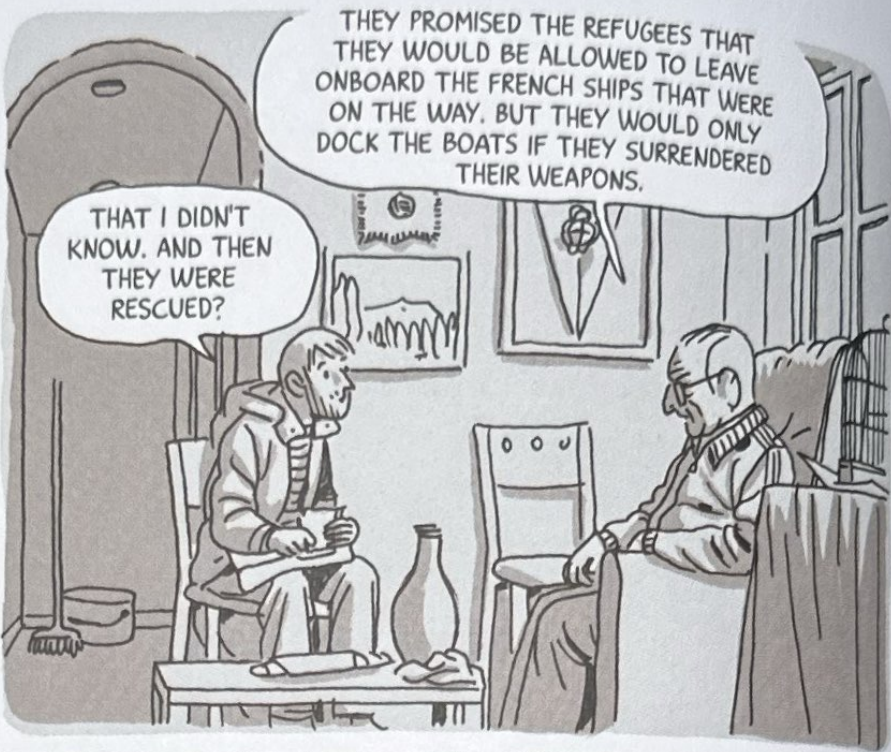
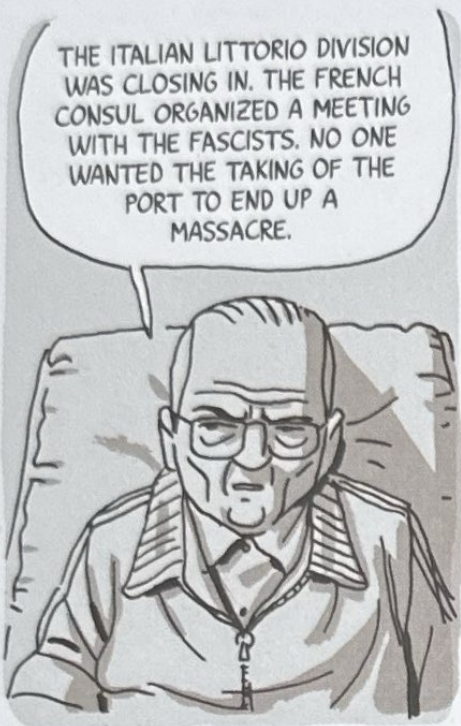
AFTER THE STANBROOK THERE WERE NO OTHER RESCUE SHIPS.

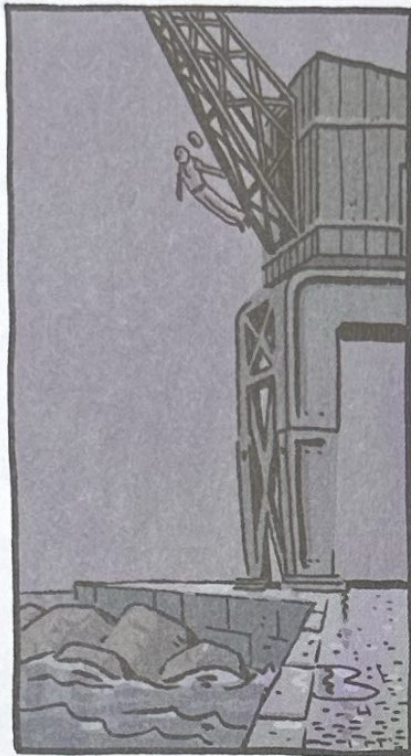
WHAT HAPPENED TO THE FIFTEEN THOUSAND PEOPLE LEFT BEHIND AT THE PORT WHO COULDN'T LEAVE?





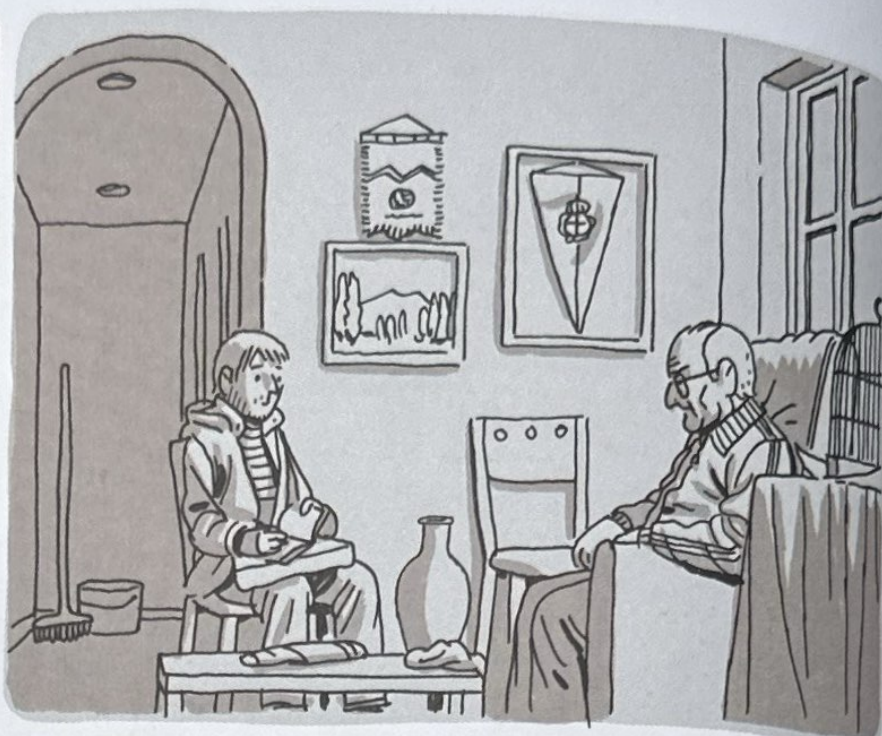








AND THAT WAS THE END
OF THE WAR.

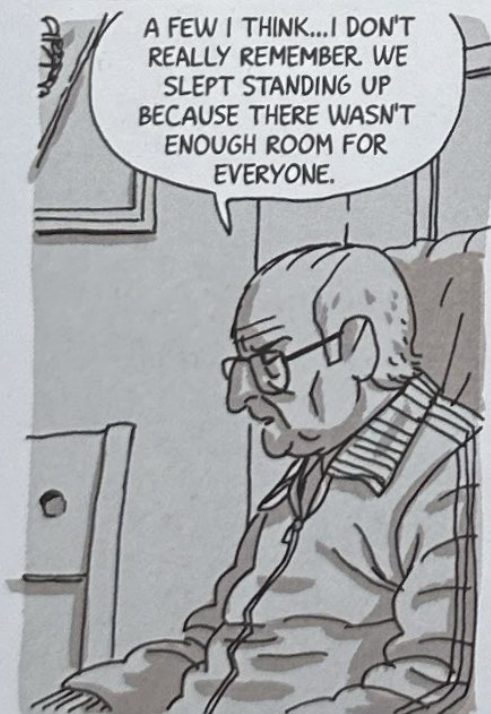


WHERE DID THE
STANBROOK TAKE
YOU?



TO ORAN.

HOW MANY DAYS
DID THE CROSSING
TAKE?



A FEW I THINK... I DON'T
REALLY REMEMBER. WE
SLEPT STANDING UP
BECAUSE THERE WASN'T
ENOUGH ROOM FOR
EVERYONE.



CROWDED, NO FOOD,
NO WATER, WITH SICK
PEOPLE, CHILDREN...

YES.



THOSE CONDITIONS MUST HAVE BEEN VERY HARD FOR...

IT WAS ALL A LONG TIME AGO.



I'M TIRED.



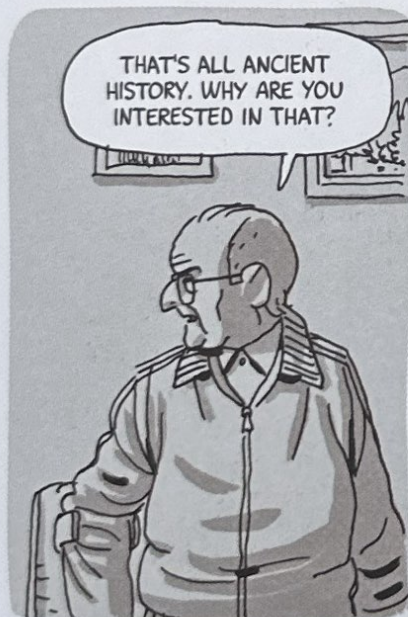
OH...OF COURSE.

WE CAN CONTINUE THIS AFTERNOON, IF YOU'RE UP TO IT.

WE'RE NOT FINISHED YET? WHAT MORE DO YOU WANT TO KNOW?



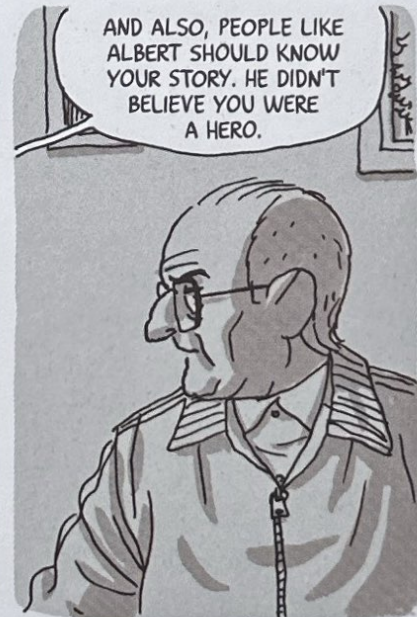
I'D LIKE IT IF YOU COULD TELL ME MORE ABOUT WHAT YOU EXPERIENCED, ABOUT ARRIVING IN AFRICA, HOW YOU ENDED UP IN THE FRENCH ARMY...



THAT'S ALL ANCIENT HISTORY. WHY ARE YOU INTERESTED IN THAT?



I THINK IT SHOULD BE OF INTEREST TO EVERYONE, SO THAT WE DON'T SUFFER AGAIN AT THE HANDS OF FASCIST IDEOLOGY, RIGHT?



AND ALSO, PEOPLE LIKE ALBERT SHOULD KNOW YOUR STORY. HE DIDN'T BELIEVE YOU WERE A HERO.



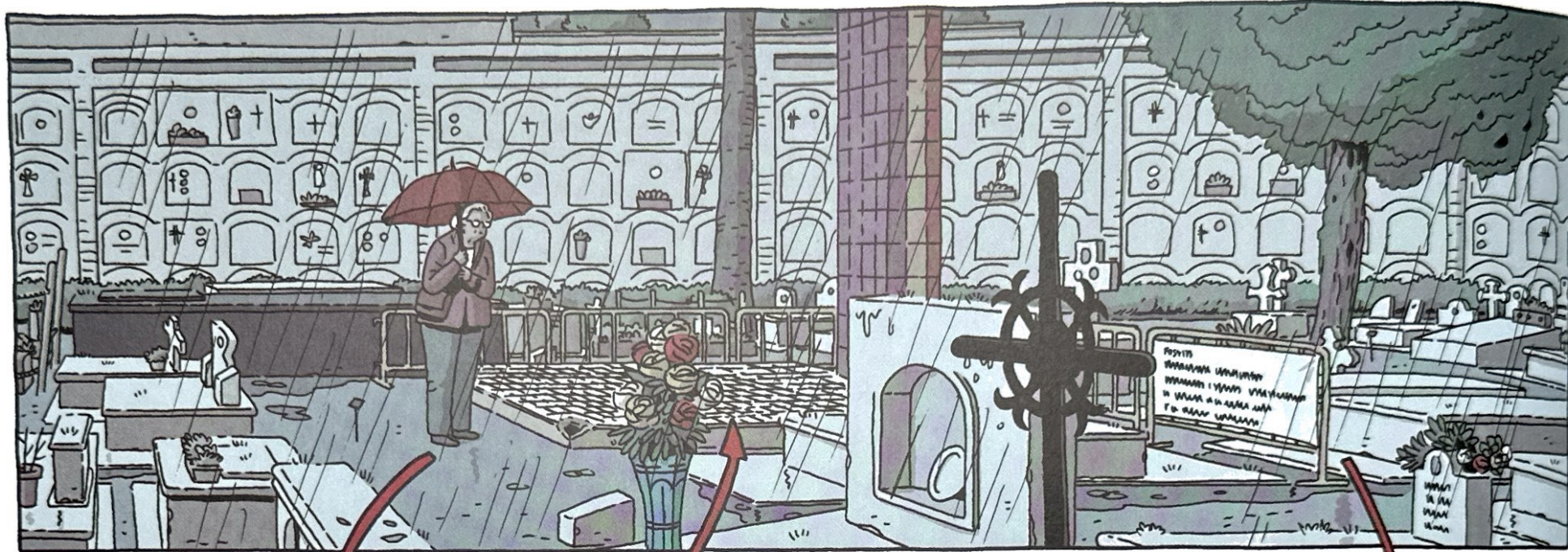


El abismo del olvido

PACÓ ROCA / RODRIGO TERRASA

ASTIBERRI





Pepica Celda
tiene 81 años.



Es la hija de
José Celda Beneyto.

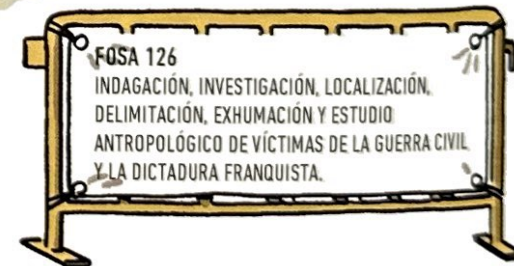


Pepe para sus compañeros.



Ellos, junto a la anterior saca y
190 personas más, fueron fusilados
y arrojados a la fosa 126.

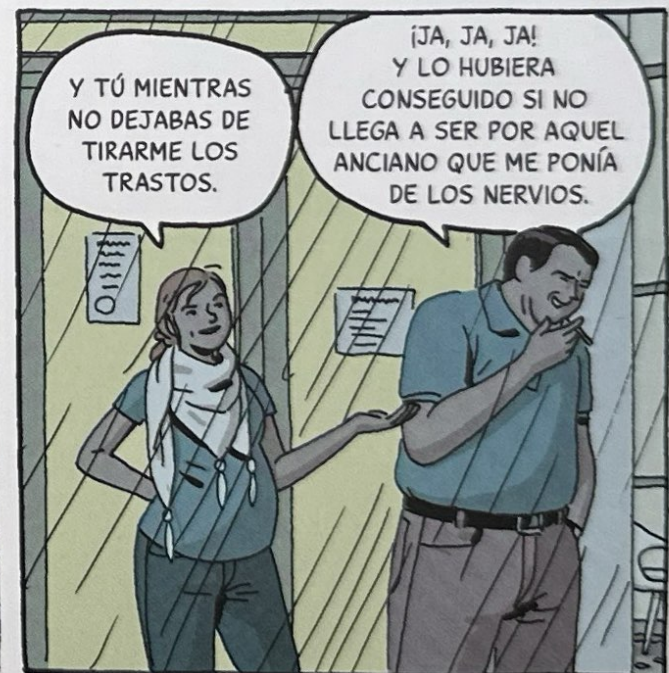
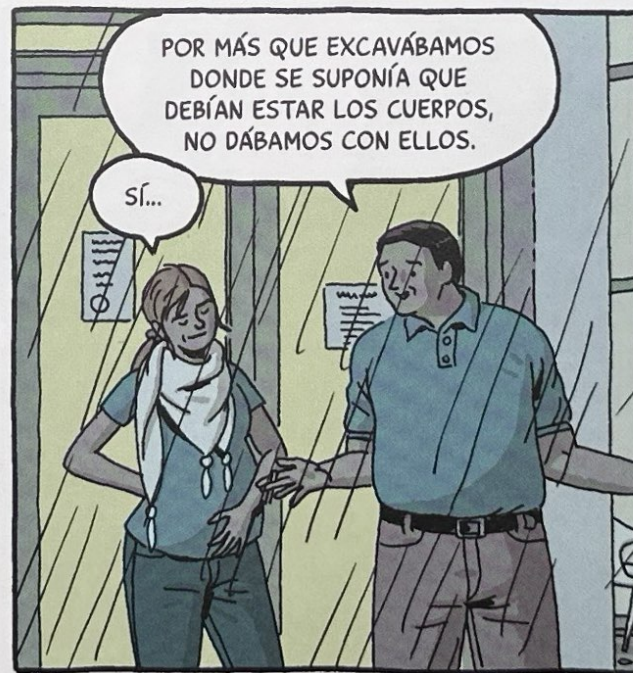
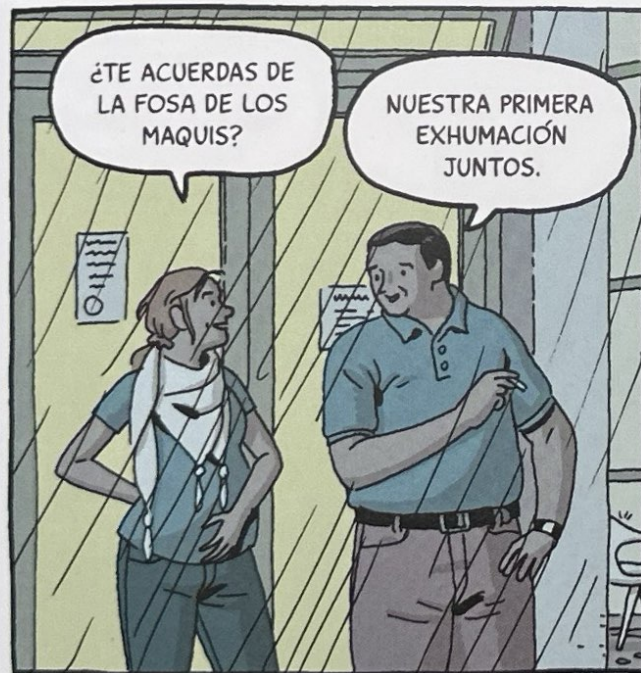
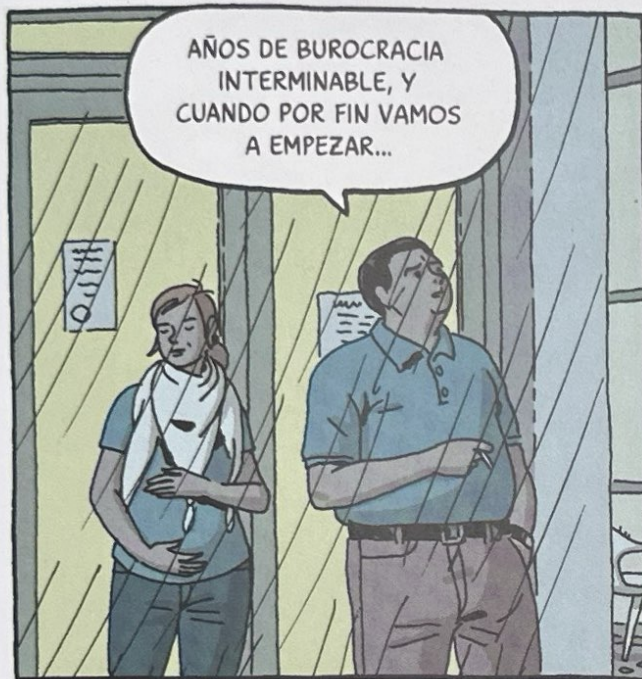
Gracias a Pepica
empezó todo este
proceso de
exhumación.

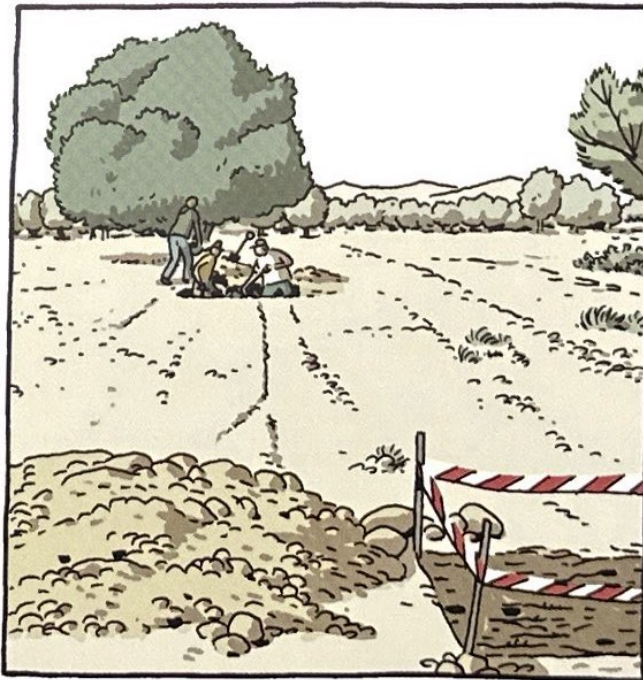


FOSA 126
INDAGACIÓN, INVESTIGACIÓN, LOCALIZACIÓN,
DELIMITACIÓN, EXHUMACIÓN Y ESTUDIO
ANTROPOLÓGICO DE VÍCTIMAS DE LA GUERRA CIVIL
Y LA DICTADURA FRANQUISTA.













Y AHÍ ESTABAN.

LA GUARDIA CIVIL
LE OBLIGÓ A CAVAR
LA FOSA.



¿ENTRAMOS?

VAMOS.



OYE, ESO DE QUE CON MÁS TIEMPO
HUBIERA ACABADO EN TU HABITACIÓN NO
TE LO CREES NI BORRACHO.

¿CÓMO?



AÚN TE
LO TUVISTE QUE
CURRAR MUCHO,
MANU.



...YO HACE TIEMPO
QUE NO LA VEO.

CREO QUE ESTHER ESTABA
EN UNA EXCAVACIÓN EN
ALMANSA.

PERO SI ELLA SIEMPRE
SE QUEJABA DE LO
MAL QUE PAGABAN.



YA VEIS QUÉ TIEMPO TENEMOS.

PUES DAN MALO PARA AL MENOS DOS SEMANAS.

HASTA QUE NO DEJE DE LLOVER NO PODEMOS EMPEZAR.

Y NO TENEMOS MUCHO TIEMPO.



COMO SABÉIS, DESDE EL PRINCIPIO HEMOS TENIDO EN CONTRA AL AYUNTAMIENTO HACIENDO TODO LO POSIBLE PARA QUE NO SE EXHUMARA LA FOSA.



PERO AL FINAL NO LES HA QUEDADO OTRA QUE CUMPLIR LA LEY.



ESO SÍ, A LO QUE VAMOS, NOS OBLIGAN A TERMINAR UN MES ANTES DEL PLAZO PREVISTO.

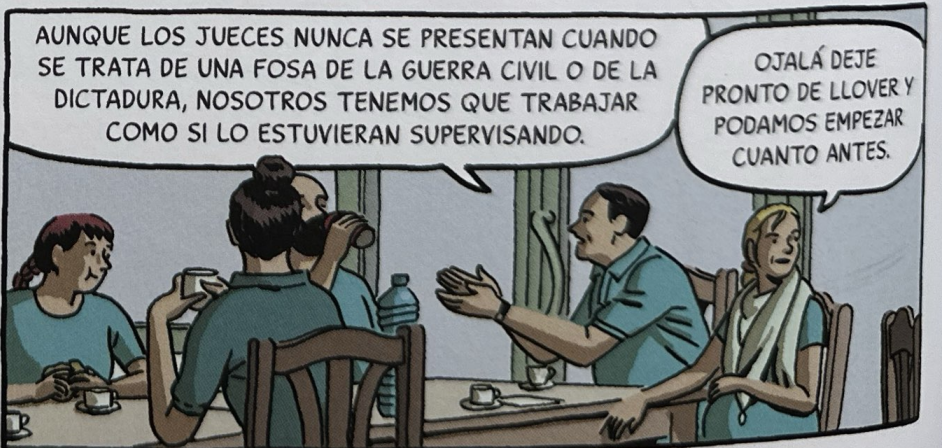
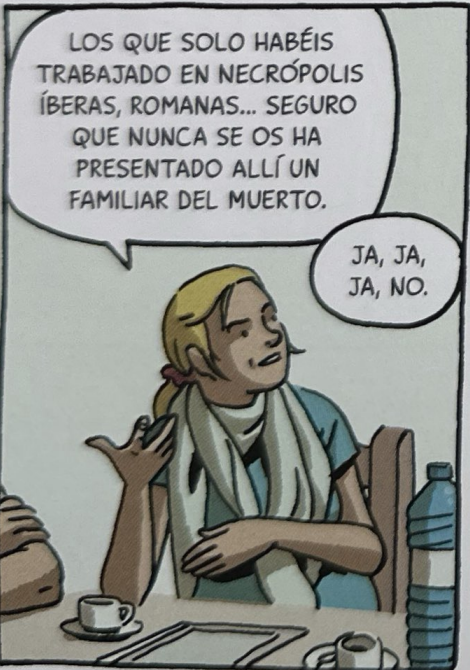


SI NO LLEGAMOS, TENDREMOS QUE DEVOLVER LA SUBVENCIÓN Y EMPEZAR DE CERO.



YA NO QUEREMOS DISCUTIR MÁS CON ELLOS.

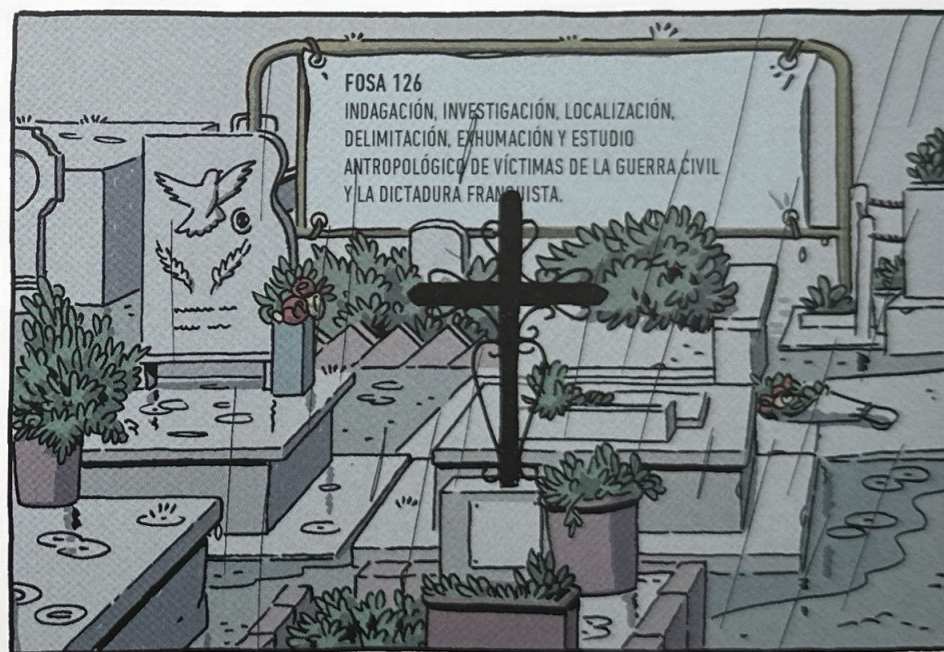
ASÍ QUE TODO DEBE ESTAR TERMINADO PARA EL DÍA DE TODOS LOS SANTOS.

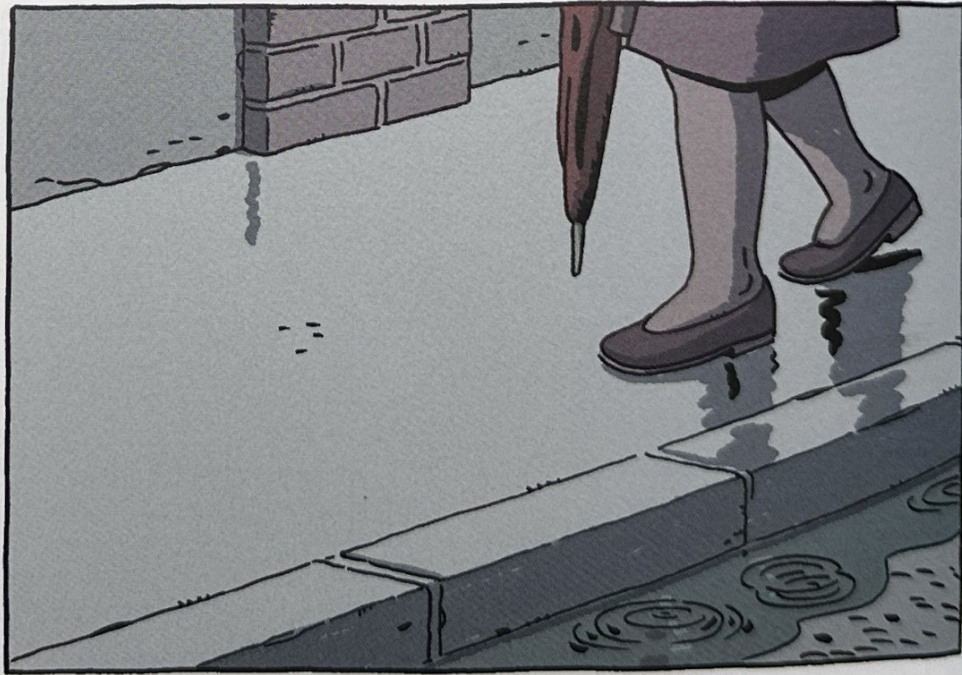
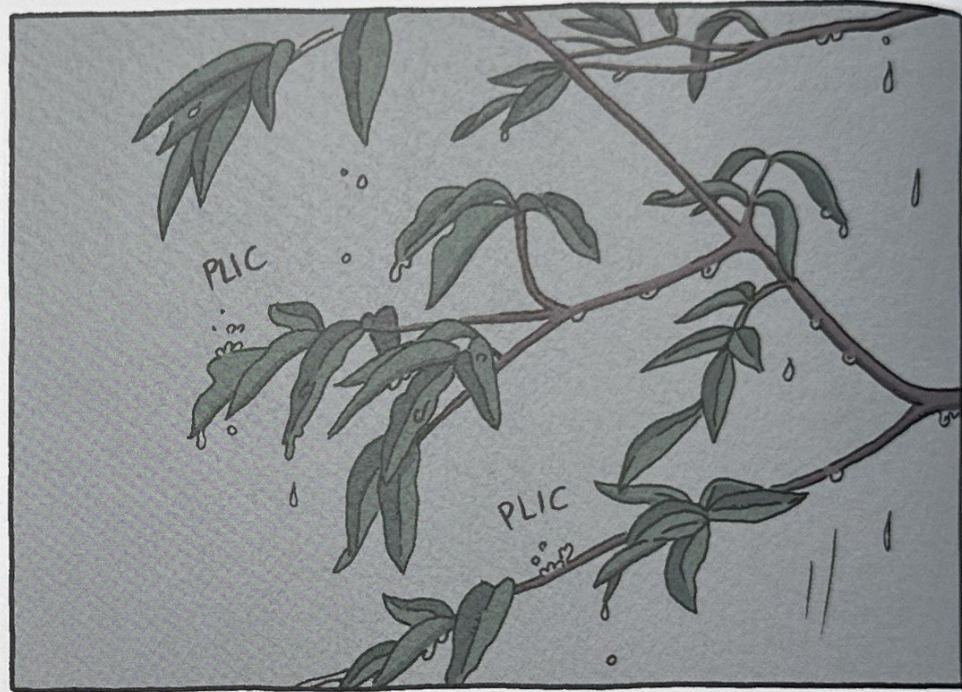
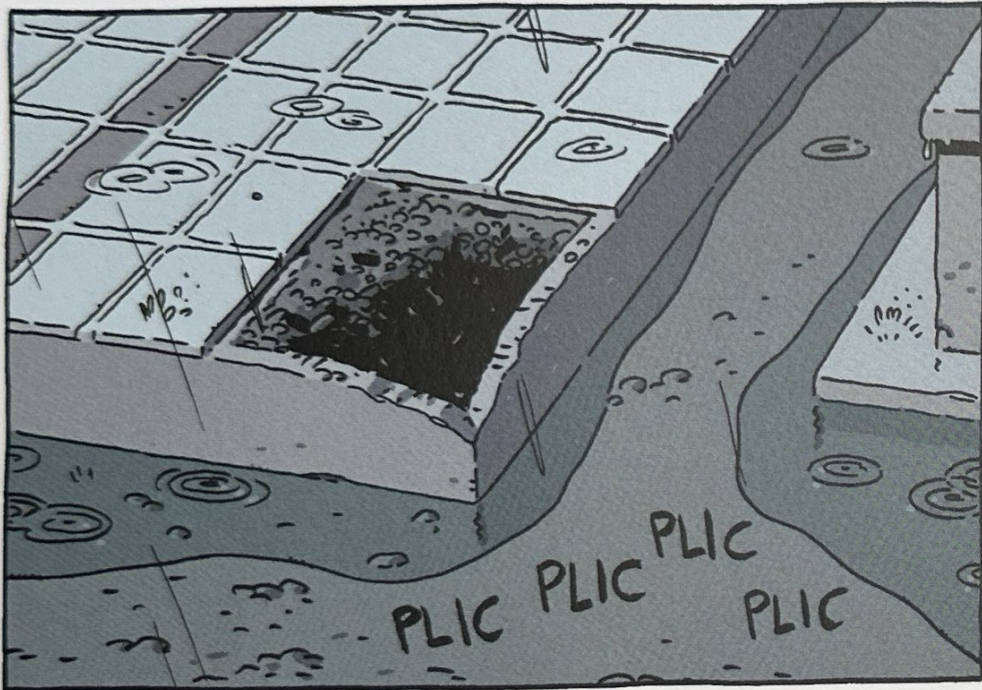


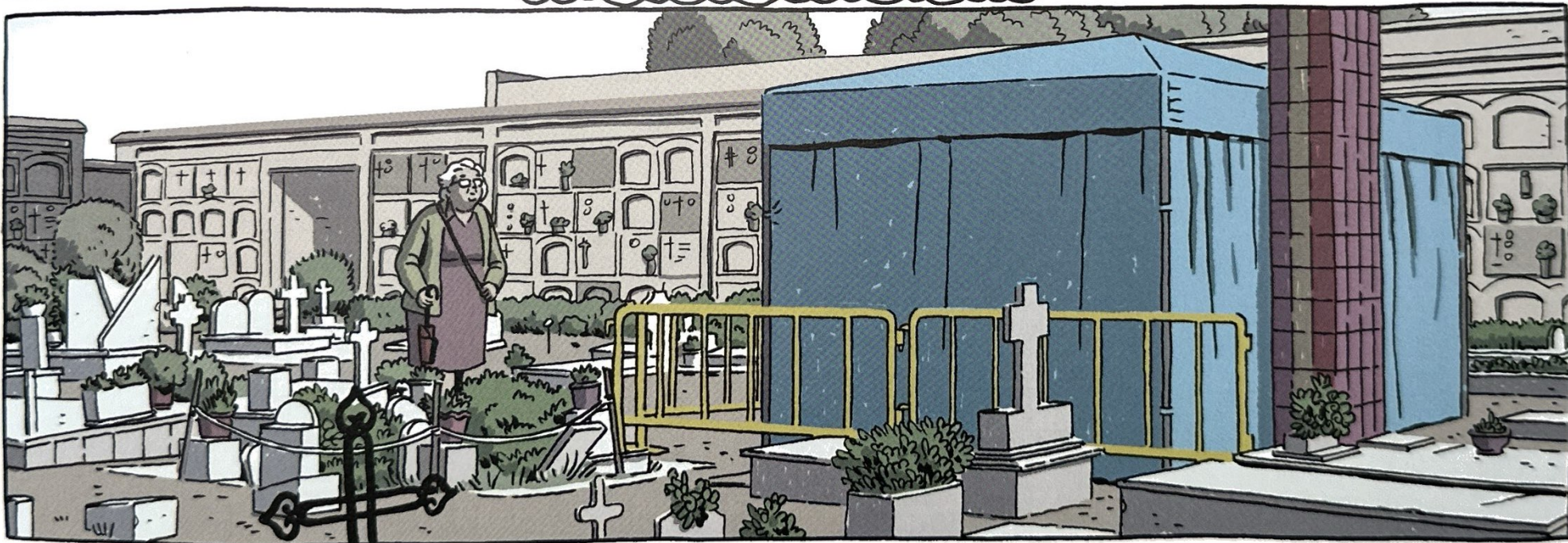


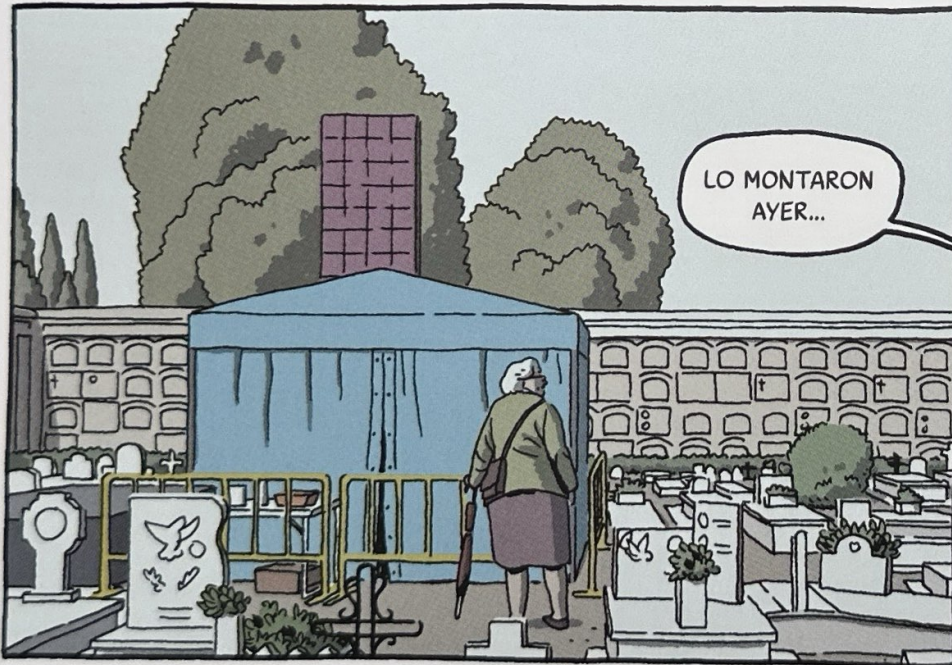










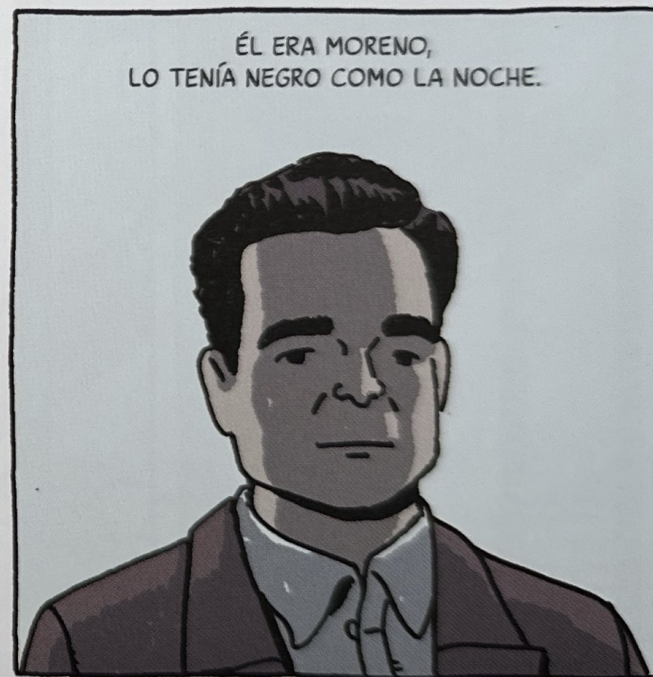












PERO LOS MESES QUE ESTUVO EN LA CÁRCEL ESPERANDO A SER FUSILADO LE CAYERON ENCIMA COMO SI FUERAN AÑOS...

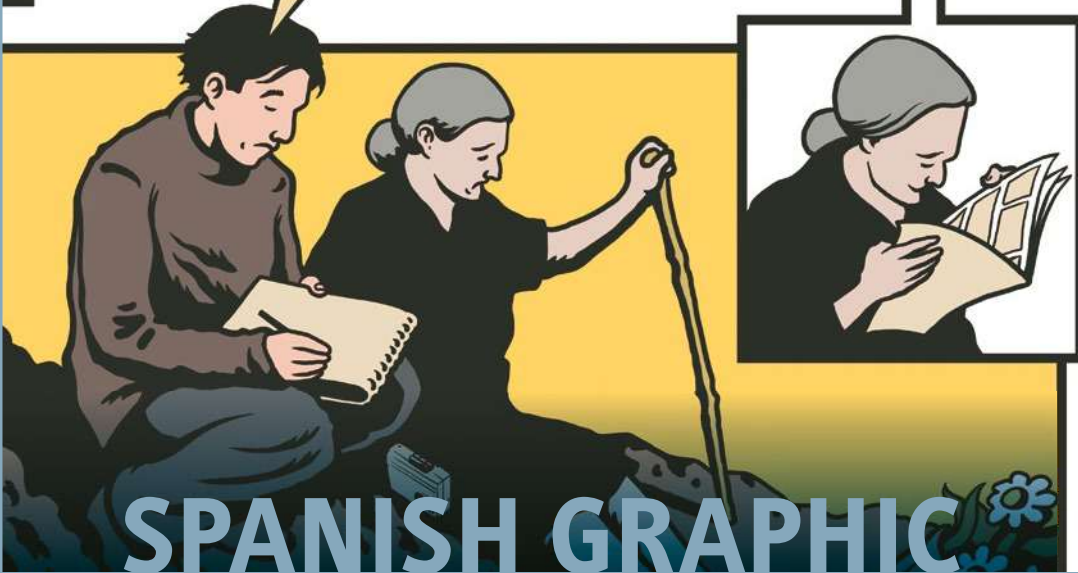


Y EL PELO SE LE
PUSO ASÍ DE BLANCO,
COMO LA NIEVE.





PALGRAVE STUDIES IN COMICS AND GRAPHIC NOVELS



SPANISH GRAPHIC NARRATIVES

Recent Developments in Sequential Art

Edited by
Collin McKinney · David F. Richter

palgrave
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Memory, Amnesia, and Forgetting: Graphic Representations of a Chronic Disease in Twentieth- and Twenty-First-Century Spain

Fernando Simón Abad

Comics have had a clear impact on Spanish society in recent decades, not only as a means of recovering historical memory—and thus doing justice to a large part of society that has gone underrepresented in art—, but also in the recognition of unhealed traumas. Similarly, this essay suggests that the graphic novel deserves a more central place in the academic field as an essential object for Hispanic cultural studies in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. With an eye on the past that informs today's socio-political situation, this essay analyzes the concepts of memory and forgetting from a clinical and historical perspective in three recent Spanish graphic narratives: Antonio Altarriba and Kim's *El arte de volar* [The Art of Flying], Paco Roca's *Los surcos del azar* [Twists of Fate], and Santiago García and Luis Bustos's *¡García!*. Although each of these graphic novels differs in

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form and style, they all address the impact of the Civil War and Francoism on the Spanish democratic society of the post-Transition. By tracing the line between these novels' pedagogical and historical importance, one can see how the past continues to have echoes in the present.

SPANISH DEMOCRATIC MEMORICIDE

Forgetfulness in contemporary Spain has been a controversial subject since the 1970s, when the Franco regime began to unravel. After the years of the Transition¹—and after supposedly having overcome the dictatorship—Spanish society has not been able, or willing, to provide a unanimous response to the dilemma of its memoristic recovery. What was the role of the Spanish State, a State that praises itself as a model of transition to democracy; a State that also considers itself modern and fully democratic? If one assumes that a solution has not been sought, when exactly was this path decided and who were the agents interested in not giving voice to the memories of a sector of Spanish society?

The Ley de Amnistía [Law of Amnesty] of 1977 laid the foundation for the current democratic state. Some would argue that this law was a necessary step in the reconciliation of the divided “two Spains”—a “noventayochista” [Generation of 98] concept that Antonio Machado expressed in his book of poems *Campos de Castilla*—, clearing the way for a tense Transition that was taking place after the death of the dictator. At the same time, it marked the beginning of a pact, supported by the great majority of political forces of the time, and which still has direct social consequences today. In his book, *La guerra persistente*, Gómez López-Quiñones suggests that this pact of silence or oblivion became commonplace in the bibliography on that process of the Transition, with selective memory becoming one of its primary strategies (13). During a talk between the writers Günter Grass and Juan Goytisolo at the Centro Cultural de Círculo de Lectores in Madrid (collected by Galaxia Gutenberg under the title *Diálogo sobre la desmemoria, los tabúes y el olvido*), both authors spoke on this subject, referring to the cases of both Germany and Spain. Grass observes that, following World War II, there was an unspoken consensus that consisted in covering the past in a shroud of silence (14–15). Goytisolo

¹Scholars agree that the period of Transition to democracy in Spain began with Franco's death in 1975. What is less certain is when this transition formally ended, with some suggesting that it was with the 1977 election or the 1978 Constitution, and others asserting that it was not until the 1981 attempted coup or the 1982 PSOE election victory.

identifies a similar tendency in Spain, noting that the current generation is paying the price for the amnesia of the Transition (14–15).

Notably, both authors use three terms that are repeated over and over when attempting to approach this period on both a cultural and historical level: silence, forgetting, and amnesia. In this way, step by step, a memoricide has taken place in Spain—protected by institutions and with the consent of part of the population—and with few possibilities of reversibility. Goytisolo used this concept to define what happened to the library in Sarajevo in August 1992, when the Serbian ultranationalists reduced it to ashes under a deluge of incendiary rockets (“El memoricidio” 55). Although it may seem somewhat exaggerated to compare a situation in a time of peace like the one in Spain with one lived in a time of war in the former Yugoslavia, I will try to explain briefly how the comparison is fruitful and how, in essence, the memoristic trauma may have similar results. When a national library or archive is deliberately reduced to ashes, what one wants to achieve with this action is, first of all, to violently eliminate a container of knowledge and memory. Second, it is a symbolic act of cultural annulment as its destruction is intended to erase any vestige of the existence of such memories.

Similarly, when analyzing the events in the first two decades after the end of the dictatorship and the establishment of democracy in Spain one might ask: has there not been a self-sabotage—agreed upon by the different political factions—in the treatment of the trauma caused by a civil war that, in another context, would have been a genuine democratic transition? The aforementioned Ley de Amnistía made it impossible, on a continuous basis, to carry out any kind of legal revision of the political and social responsibilities of one side or the other. It created a *tabula rasa* that denied the losers the possibility of giving voice to their own experience of the trauma and, therefore, ostracized a large portion of the country’s collective memory. The simplest way for an event to be forgotten is, precisely, to not name it and to let the bearers of memories, those who lived the episodes that do not want to be remembered, become victims of time. In the words of José Antonio Gabriel y Galán, “Es como si el franquismo se hubiera visto agraciado con una tregua histórica, como si la historiografía le hubiese concedido un tiempo de hibernación” (n.p.) [It is as if Francoism had been blessed with a historical truce, as if historiography had granted it a time of hibernation].² From 1977 to 2007, when the Ley de Memoria

²All translations are my own.

Histórica was enforced, thirty years of silence had passed in which the main characters of history (with lower case) gradually perished. Sebastiaan Faber explains the importance of the observer or witness for the support of a credible argument, for the general public, of the prosecution of both Francoism and the Transition:

[W]itness testimony is key not only for helping viewers understand and empathize with the suffering of the victims of the Civil War and Francoism; it is also mobilized within a quasi-judicial framework as incriminating evidence against the representatives of the Franco regime as well as the architects of a Transition to democracy that prevented the guilty from being tried and punished. (13)

This is the great tragedy that was allowed in Spain's recent past, in which key witnesses were left to die without being given the opportunity—creating the relevant environment of freedom and protection—to simply leave their testimony, their evidence as witnesses to events, their memories to be studied, compared, analyzed and included, where appropriate, in the collective memory. For Spain, this period has meant the burial of the word and the implantation of a sort of global amnesia that, instead of transitory, is being established as chronic. Unlike other countries that experienced warlike conflicts on their own soil, with episodes as traumatic as the Spanish Civil War, the search for collective, family, and even individual identity in Spain was full of obstacles. The country succumbed to the partisan interests of its politicians even under the protection of the aforementioned Ley de Memoria Histórica. Beyond beginning to pave the way for a process of memoristic recovery, which has definitely begun to take place in recent years, what has been achieved is an interested use of memory as a political weapon.

THE ABSENCE OF MEMORY IN COMIC BOOKS

Faced with this situation, it is worth asking what the response of the humanistic and cultural sector has been. It is not the aim of this work to make a compendium of each and every one of the different cultural manifestations that occurred from the 1970s to the present day. However, before beginning to analyze contemporary comics, it is necessary to contextualize how the graphic novel became what it is today. Michael Matly, in his book *El cómic sobre la Guerra Civil*, exhaustively compiles the comic

strips and graphic novels published about the Spanish conflict, from the moment of the War until the decade of 2010. In chapters 4 and 5, Matly points out the fundamental differences between the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s in terms of the volume of pages dedicated to the Civil War and, above all, in terms of the tone with which the different messages are presented. The preferred format in these first decades was the short story and, rarely, the album. This was due to the proliferation of fanzines and satirical magazines, many of them marginal, and, therefore, these did not have an excessively large social impact. An important detail is Matly's description of comics from the 1980s, which gave birth to an awareness of the need to unearth the voices of the losing side. Matly astutely points out that the perspective of the comics of this period was always Republican, and the Francoist is essentially absent. In these works, the winner remains mute, and is often portrayed as a Moor, an Italian, or a German, rather than a Spaniard. It is not so much a question of telling the war from the Republican perspective as it is of showing Republicans in the war, affirming the identity of the "other" Spain, and not just that of the winners (Matly 119). When Matly mentions the winner who remains mute, he reveals the fear of pointing the finger at those responsible, even after the democratization of Spanish society. The act of blurring the responsibility of the dictatorship by making it similar exclusively to the Moor, the German, or the Italian (allies of the military rebels in the Civil War), shows the continuity of a discourse that left a deep mark on the collective imagination, in which no settling of scores or any kind of social cleansing was contemplated. But on the other hand, it also allowed a starting point in the search for the identity of the "two Spains," even if during the 1980s the Republican's perspective on the war and the dictatorship was not evident.

A panoramic look at the 1990s reveals the lack of interest of a broad sector of society—reflected in the comic book market—in treating any kind of memoristic discourse about the years before the Transition in a profound way. Thus, it is observed how the decisions taken to close the fratricidal stage of the war and the dictatorship, whose idealization with the passage of time seems to be adulterating little by little, decisively influence the cultural production of those years. A possible exception could be *Un largo silencio* by Miguel Gallardo, a work that was published in 1997 but until its reissue in 2012 went virtually unnoticed in the Spanish market. The search for a collective identity and memory ceased to be a primordial theme for society due to the abrupt manner in which the past was

amnestied in order to move forward. It seems that the Spanish population, which was traumatized, democratized, and amnesiac, once again disdained their past as a bad nightmare about which they could not remember the details, nor did they want to.

From this perspective, there were no flags, no colors, no sides. In terms of psychiatry, Spanish society could be diagnosed with a dissociative amnesia generated by the post-traumatic stress of war. The dictatorship increased the trauma and created a new sweetened memory, after which the Transition sedated Spain with the drugs of change, democratization, and freedom, thereby suppressing any impulse of revisionism. Daniel Ausente points to this problem in the cultural field when he notes that neither comic books nor other media have engaged critically with the history of the Transition and its social context (131). The comic, as a vehicle of remembrance, was used marginally and, although it cannot be said that it was non-existent, its social impact was minimal.

The generation that should have shared its memories of both the war and the dictatorship during those years gave way to a new generation of authors at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Considering post-memory as “the relationship that the generation after those who witnessed cultural or collective trauma bears to the experiences of those who came before, experiences that they ‘remember’ only by means of the stories” (Hirsch 106), it can be affirmed that these new authors would correspond to a second generation of postmemory. At the beginning of the century, this generational changeover found a favorable moment to be able to investigate and recall family histories, all from a present and universal point of view, to which they were able to give a collective dimension, as suggested by Sánchez Zapatero (339–40). In *Hijos de la razón*, Jordi Gracia describes what for him was the great handicap of Spanish society until that time, noting that much of what happened is yet to be told, and this fear of remembering the past is an axis that defines the present (18). With the objectivity provided by the distance of time, it can be said that the generation of the graphic novel banished the fear of revisionism and remembrance without revanchism. With their works, they gave the public the keys to remember what happened. And certainly, they benefited from the political situation that occurred after the implementation of the Ley de Memoria Histórica and, at the same time, from the creation of the Premio Nacional del Cómic granted by the Ministry of Culture in 2007.

THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY AND THE GRAPHIC NOVEL GENERATION

While the first decade of the new millennium seems to foreshadow a certain continuity with the previous one, in the mid 2000s a turning point occurred in the history of Spanish comic books. The changes seen in the production industry that were taking place in the last quarter of a century in countries in which comics enjoyed (and still enjoy) greater social respect—Japan, the United States, France, and Belgium—are slowly beginning to take hold in Spain. Changes are also occurring in relation to comics format, the creation of specialized bookshops, the rise of the so-called alternative comics, and the decline of the superhero genre. The graphic novel, according to Santiago García, continues to undergo very important processes of change in the evolution of its art, its authors, and its readers (*La novela* 273). Although younger than traditional plastic arts, literature or music, graphic novels draw from all of these and as a result have achieved a respect that had been denied the comics form in its earlier years. If the comic had to compete with television or video games as primary sources of entertainment for the youth, it could be said that the graphic novel constitutes a splinter of that graphic tradition, but with its own artistic values. Santiago García describes it as “una forma artística que ya no compete con la televisión como medio de masas, sino que se plantea como un medio culto con su propia identidad y sus propios espacios [...] y su nuevo público, un público general” (*La novela* 266–67) [a new artistic form that no longer competes with television as a mass medium, which presents itself as an educated medium with its own identity and its own spaces, and its new public, a general public].

As noted, the greatest advance came with the establishment of the Premio Nacional del Cómic in 2007. An additional breakthrough would come at the end of the same year with the publication of Paco Roca’s *Arrugas*, which confirmed the commercial potential of the graphic novel, reaching an incredible 20,000 copies sold in the first year. This fact, accompanied by very positive reviews, led to *Arrugas* winning the Premio Nacional in 2008. In a televised event in 2016, the authors Francesc Capdevila “Max” (winner of the prize in 2005), Ana Galvañ, David Rubín, and Santiago García (winner of the prize in 2015) noted that Paco Roca had become the preeminent author of Spanish graphic narratives due to the success of each graphic novel he publishes. García’s words during this event are especially enlightening:

Me molesta un poco que a veces a la gente le dices, “Bueno [...],” y dicen, “No, [solo] Paco Roca; Paco Roca es una excepción.” Y yo, “No, amigo, Paco Roca no es una excepción. Paco Roca es uno de nosotros, y lo único que está haciendo es enseñarnos que hay un camino, y darnos esperanza y un ejemplo que realmente se puede funcionar y se pueden hacer las cosas bien.” Y lo que está haciendo Paco Roca cada vez que tiene un triunfo es crear lectores para nosotros. (García et al. 30:50)

[It bothers me a little that sometimes you tell people that [you do sell graphic novels] and they say “no, only Paco Roca; Paco Roca is an exception.” I tell them, “No, my friend, Paco Roca is not an exception. Paco Roca is one of us and all he’s doing is teaching us that there’s a way, and giving us hope and an example that you can really work and do things well.” What Paco Roca does every time he has a triumph is create readers for us.]

Paco Roca’s impact on the topic of memory is also noteworthy, with some of his publications making it difficult to dissociate the name of the Valencian author from this theme, as the author himself acknowledges: “deep down, I’m always talking about the same thing: about memory, about characters who fight stoically to maintain dignity” (qtd. in Pérez 55). Although in *Arrugas* he discusses memory from a didactic approach to Alzheimer’s disease—telling the story of Emilio, an old man with the illness—his work in terms of memory recovery most clearly manifests itself with the publication of *Los surcos del azar* by Astiberri in 2013.

Roca’s *Arrugas* opened the market for a new generation of authors with backgrounds in the fine arts, art history, philology, illustration, animation, journalism, and advertising, authors such as Juanjo Guarnido, Santiago García, David Rubín, Alfonso Zapico, or Jaime Martín, among others. Some were born during the Franco period and lived their childhood in the death throes of the regime, while others were born after the transition to democracy. They belong, therefore, to the era of “postmemory” writers and illustrators since none lived the traumatic events in their own skin, but, rather, they received the trauma from their elders. Each of them has touched on issues of memory in their works, confronting and resolving them in a variety of ways, and thus helping the country recover from its state of amnesia. Their works give voice (almost life) to stories that had not been told, and they have reached a number of readers that would have been unthinkable a couple of decades ago when the Spanish comics industry found itself in a very delicate situation. They stood up to silence, oblivion, and neglect—in cultural production, in politics, and in

society—to earn the respect not only of readers who know the medium, but also of general readers both inside and outside Spain.

GRAPHIC NARRATIVES AND THE RECUPERATION OF MEMORY

I have chosen three different works from this period—*El arte de volar*, by Antonio Altarriba and Kim (illustrator), *Los surcos del azar*, by Paco Roca, and *¡García!*, by Santiago García and Luis Bustos (illustrator)—each important for its unique work of recovery and for being, at the same time, didactic sources that seek to annul social amnesia in the context of the institutionalized Spanish silence of Francoism. Although the three are different in their argumentative approaches, each of them coincide on the same point: the use of fiction as a tool to facilitate remembrance. *El arte de volar* and *Los surcos del azar* both represent the Spanish exile from the Republican perspective and the search for memories of the generation that lived through the events of the Civil War, Francoism, and the Transition. One of the connections between both graphic novels is that they use older characters—Antonio Altarriba (father) and Miguel Ruiz—to recover stories from their forgotten or hidden personal memories.

Altarriba recreates his father's story based on the latter's written personal history, but using fiction to avoid falling into mere biography.³ Using his present vision and the emotional impact of his father's suicide, the reason for which he wrote the work, Altarriba commemorates his father as a member of a collective that suffered the loss of a war, driving him into exile. The novel arises from the need to take the father's testimony and tell his story and, at the same time, to vindicate it. The suicide of the elderly Altarriba marks the beginning and the end of the novel, impregnated by the anguish and uneasiness of the trauma suffered. Although on the surface it could be taken as an example of individual memory, this graphic novel aims to give voice to a collective that was retaliated against and that, until its last days, lived the bitterness of personal and ideological defeat. Altarriba senior found in his written account a place where he recovers his

³In *El arte de volar* (2009) Antonio Altarriba describes his father's point of view regarding what happens in the family environment, although he would later pay tribute to his mother with *El ala rota* (2017), giving a more holistic view of the situations that occurred within the marriage. Both titles are complementary to one another and at the same time independent in their points of view.

experiences, but above all a place to record what he is remembering as memory begins to fail him.

The life of Altarriba's father is marked by frustration, both personal (in his marriage) and ideological, having lost his fight against fascism during the Civil War. A sample of this can be seen during a nightmare that Antonio suffers due to illness (141, see Fig. 3.1). In this dream, Antonio is surrounded by the symbols of the Falange (the yoke and the arrows) in the middle of a field from which emerge the Christian cross and the figure of a black eagle outlined in the sky. The eagle becomes more visible and begins to pursue Antonio, who is eventually hunted down as prey, with the eagle gouging out his eyes. Later on, the eagle lands on the crossbeam and becomes the shield that Francoism used on its national flag, while carrying Antonio's eyes in its beak. The allegory closes with a blind Antonio, bleeding from his eye sockets and surrounded by male figures doing the fascist salute while he says: "¡Qué bien, por fin no veo nada...!" (141) [How nice, at last I can't see anything!]. The page serves as an allegory of how the Spanish people, and especially the defeated Republicans, began to act after the victory of the rebel side: they simply let things happen, put on a blindfold, allowed the suffering inside them to live on, and even felt the obligation to feel grateful for what happened.

The author portrays his father as dejected, worn out by life, and defeated by the fascist ideology he so hated. Forced to live bootlegging coal in France and later smuggling raw materials for the manufacture of cookies in Spain, the protagonist has betrayed the anarchist ideals for which he had fought for decades. To make matters worse, he returns to Spain to work for an opportunist who joins the Falange as a means of making contacts and quick money, which leads to an inner conflict for the protagonist. In a way, that struggle is aggravated when he marries Petra, a traditional woman of strong Catholic convictions. For Antonio, this means living "sobre mi propio cadáver" (145, see Fig. 3.2) [on his own corpse] and "embriaga[ado] de olvido" [intoxicated with forgetfulness], imposing a silence that torments him and provokes the depression that leads him to suicide. Although Antonio decides to take the path of silence, there is certainly little more he could do in a society in which, simply because he has been a Republican combatant (and a deserter of the Nationalist side), he could end up arrested and executed: "No se trataba de traición sino de suicidio ideológico... Para afrontar el presente, debían acabar con el pasado... Morir para seguir vivos" (139, see Fig. 3.3) [It was not an act of

Creating Comics

as Journalism, Memoir & Nonfiction

Foreword by Josh Neufeld



By Randy Duncan, Michael Ray Taylor
& David Stoddard

Nonfiction Narrative Techniques

While good art can give nonfiction comics a sense of immediacy and intimacy, it is usually a good story that keeps readers turning pages long into the night. No list of facts, no matter how significant or surprising, can compete with narrative in holding a reader's attention. Whether a work is a traditional novel, film, play, graphic novel, or nonfiction comic, readers tend to identify with the protagonist in a story. They become caught up in the challenges and trials that person (or sometimes a group of people) must face. But what elements make a good story? More specifically, how do those elements come together to create a narrative structure?

Novice writers (and some Hollywood executives) mistakenly equate *story* with *plot*, which is to say they assume that the more astounding the events—murder, mayhem, monsters, explosions, car chases, and don't forget sex—the better the resulting story will be. You can see this flawed thinking behind low-budget science fiction films: *Does the audience like sharks? Does the audience like tornados? Let's give them a sharknado! Already been done? Then let's put sharks in an erupting volcano—a sharkano! And it's heading for New York! Someone get Tara Reid on the line . . .*

Obviously, this mentality has led to some poor stories (some so comically bad that they succeed anyway, but never mind that). Yet in the world of nonfiction narrative, the plot is only one element of story, and almost never the most important one. While a narrative must generally follow a plot structure (sometimes called the story **arc**), true stories tend to succeed or fail based on the traditional elements of **character**, **setting**, and **scene** (including **action** and **dialogue**). With effort, a writer or artist can discover these elements while gathering facts and then organize them into a gripping story.

THE SEVEN TYPES OF NARRATOR

"The comics format craves a narrative" (Jüngst 2010, 254), and where there is a narrative there is a narrator, someone telling the story. When the storyteller is unobtrusive we do not necessarily think of the information as coming from a particular point of view. However, when there is an identifiable narrator we become more conscious of the fact that the information presented reflects a particular subjective perception.

The type of narrator who speaks in your nonfiction comic will affect how readers evaluate and connect with the information you convey. What follows are the seven most common types of narrators in nonfiction comics.

1) Omniscient Narrator

The Omniscient Narrator seems to know all aspects of the story, and in the case of nonfiction comics, has virtually unlimited expertise about the information being presented. The narration text appears in captions, with no narrator visible on the page. In most instances, no personal pronouns appear in the text—no use of “I” to create a sense of presence and no use of “you” or “we” to connect with the audience. Information is stated in a matter-of-fact manner with the expectation that the reader will accept it as researched fact.

2) Implied Author

Sometimes, even though there are no drawings of the narrator and no narrator word balloons that “speak” to us, we get the sense that it is the author of the work



FIGURE 7.1 Robert O’Nale, Jr. is a Present Author Narrator on the first page, but an Implied Author Narrator for many of the subsequent panels in *Reagan Babies* (2003).
© 2003 Robert O’Nale, Jr.

who is sharing the information and telling the story. Some comics contain a text introduction or preface by the author. This creates a context of direct communication to the reader. If the writing style, the “voice,” of the narration in the captions is similar to the author’s voice in the introduction, then readers are likely to assume it is the author speaking through those captions. The use of a first person pronoun is another way to imply that the author is doing the narrating. Unless some other entity has been specially identified as the narrator, readers assume that “I” represents the author. Even without the use of a first person pronoun, the memoir genre itself implies that the author is telling his or her own story.

3) Present Author

In some instance readers can be certain that the author is present in the work as the narrator. Perhaps the author is not visible, but it is established early on in the text that the author of the work is “speaking” to the readers. However, it is probably making better use of the comics form when the author becomes visibly present on the page as an avatar. In his use of the comics form to explain how to understand and create comics, Scott McCloud speaks directly to the reader through his on-the-page (or onscreen) avatar. Reading McCloud’s comics feels like being engaged in a (rather one-sided) conversation with Scott. To better represent the Scott McCloud his fans see in person at conventions, he has aged his avatar over the years, adding a bit of heft and gray at the temples.

AUTHORITATIVE VS. REFLECTIVE NARRATOR

When the narrator is personalized, as the author or a character, it can undermine the authority of the narrator. We tend to accept an omniscient narrator as authoritative, but when there is a “person” present we are more likely to wonder “How do you know that?” The personalized narrator might have to establish her or his credentials.

Another option would be to take a reflective approach. This works best with the author as narrator. The information is not presented simply as lifeless facts, but as the author’s ideas, and we get some sense of how those ideas were developed. The reflective narrator is not merely giving information, but also sharing with the reader the reasoning process that led to a particular point of view and even, on occasion, the emotional connection to the events and concepts (Genette 1988, 1990).

4) Expert Narrator

This is a real person (but not the author) who already knows all the information and shares it with the readers, like the host of a television program. An Expert Narrator’s credentials are usually given in an introduction or in the first panel in which she or

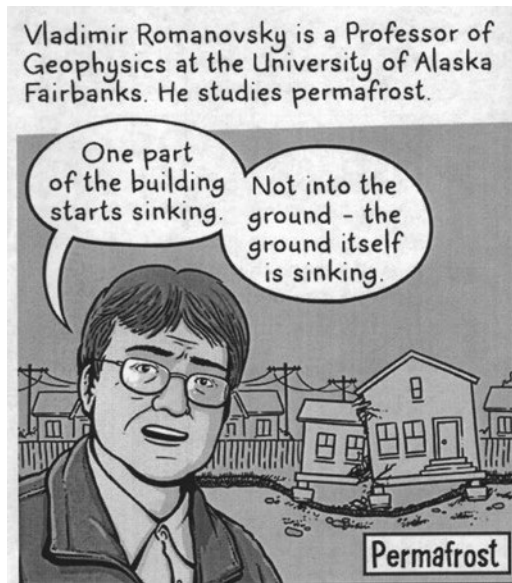


FIGURE 7.2 *The introduction of an Expert Narrator from “The Big Thaw” in Symbolia.*
© 2014 Andy Warner.

he appears (see Figure 7.2). To prevent the comic from becoming just a dry lecture, the artist needs to provide interesting visuals to accompany the narration and the writer needs to convey the narrator’s (hopefully) interesting personality.

The Expert Narrator moves through the world of the story as he or she explains concepts to the reader, essentially operating as a tour guide. A variation on this tactic is that the Expert Narrator explains the world of the story, but the character exists in a limbo setting outside the world of the story; this is more like a guided tour from one of the ghosts in *A Christmas Carol* (or *Scrooged*).

5) Experienced Character

As discussed elsewhere in this book, many comics created to educate about nonfiction topics embed factual information in a fictional story with fictional characters. While it might seem that fictional characters would be totally out of place in a work of nonfiction, they are actually commonplace in educational comics, most of which exist on the boundary between fiction and nonfiction.

The Experienced Character narrator already knows the information and is functioning in a teacher–student(s) relationship with other characters. The Experienced Character usually does most of the talking, with word balloons providing the sort of narration that would normally appear in captions. Comics with this type of narrator can have panels overstuffed with word balloons and can read as boring as the typical lecture, unless Experienced Characters do their teaching within a story structure

with action and suspense. The creator of this type of comic should seek a narrator more like Robin Williams in the film *Dead Poet's Society* and less like Ben Stein in *Ferris Bueller's Day Off*.

6) Experiencing Character

Experiencing Characters have things explained to them by other characters or discover information through their own initiative. Because they are learning the information during the course of the narrative, not telling information they already know, these characters are not truly narrators. Instead, they are focalizers.

Heike Jüngst's variation on Gerard Genette's concept of a focalizer refers to those instances where a particular character's perception of story events focuses the narrative, and that character is designed "to invite identification from the reader" (Jüngst 76). Readers experience information as filtered through the perception of focalizers, and, if the reader identifies with the character, the focalizer serves as a proxy for the reader.

Readers are more likely to identify with a focalizer if the character lives in circumstances similar to those of the reader and looks like the reader. Of course, a focalizer cannot look like every reader, so creators often use a group of Experiencing Characters in order for one or more focalizers to share characteristics (age, gender, ethnicity, etc.) with the comic's target audience (Jüngst 76–81). Artists have to be careful not to be too specific about visual elements such as hairstyles and clothing, which can become outdated quickly. Adolescents in 2017 might think the characters dress just like them, but adolescents in 2027 are likely to find the characters weird or funny. If you have ever had a teacher show you a really old DVD (or videotape!) then you have experienced that weird feeling yourself. It is best to use neutral styles for hair and clothing.

The reader should be able to, at least subconsciously, imagine being friends with someone like a focalizer. This is particularly important if one of the goals of the comic is to influence the reader to make the same attitudinal or behavioral change made by a focalizer character.

7) Celebrity Narrator

It is not unusual for a well-known actor, author, or political figure to narrate a documentary film, but it is extremely rare for such people to be portrayed as the narrator in a nonfiction or educational comic book. The Celebrity Narrator in a comic is usually fictional, but widely known; for example, a comic book character, a corporate mascot, or a character from folklore.

Reddy Kilowatt, who first appeared in 1926, became a transmedia character as the "spokesperson" for over 200 local utility companies. In the 1940s and 1950s Reddy was the narrator of a number of educational comic books that explained the science of electricity, profiled the pioneers of the field and promoted the idea of

better living through electric power. Smokey, the forest fire preventing bear, lectured young forest animals on fire safety in the 1950 comic book *Forest Fire* before becoming a star of television commercials. Mr. Civil Defense, the narrator of several mid-1950s comics books produced by the Federal Civil Defense Administration, who was only a few feet tall and had a body composed of the letters C and D, failed to capture the public imagination as effectively as Reddy and Smokey.

When comic strip or comic book characters are the narrators, they usually take part in the story. Sometimes the celebrity narrators are Experiencing Characters, who learn the information, and sometimes they are Experienced Characters, who explain the information. *Whole Numbers and Numbers Between* (1979), which contains stories such as “Hagar Needs Fractions” and “Popeye Uses Decimals,” contains both types. Hagar repeatedly experiences the need to express quantities in fractions (but they haven’t been invented yet), whereas Popeye is teaching the kids he is taking to the fair about fractions and decimals. In *Captain America and the Campbell Kids* (1980) the Campbell Kids, from a limbo setting, introduce the story and provide narration in the captions, but Captain America is the Experienced Character, leading a diverse group of youngsters on a tour of the Energy Museum and sharing his knowledge of energy production, consumption, and conservation.

When popular comic strip or comic books characters are used they are almost always accompanied by one or more young focalizers, usually both male and female and a variety of ethnicities with whom the target audience can identify.

Comics with celebrity narrators and focalizers are far removed from pure non-fiction. The characters and events are totally fictional. Only the facts are nonfiction. Keep in mind that many fictional celebrity narrators are copyrighted characters that cannot be used without the written permission of the copyright owner, and all living celebrity narrators have a “right to publicity,” meaning they can sue you for the tort of appropriation for any unauthorized use of their visual likeness. (More information about such legal concerns is given in Chapter 10.)

SUPERHEROES CREATED FOR “EDUCATIONAL” COMICS

Maybe it’s the idea that superheroes appeal to children or just that American culture in general has embraced the superhero concept, but for decades writers and artists of educational comic books in America have been creating original superheroes as a conduit for conveying information.

Most of these superheroes are Captains and almost all of them are lame.

Tax Time Services Limited published *Captain Tax Time* (1990) as an advertisement and an argument about inequities in Canadian tax law. In *Abstinence*

(Continued)

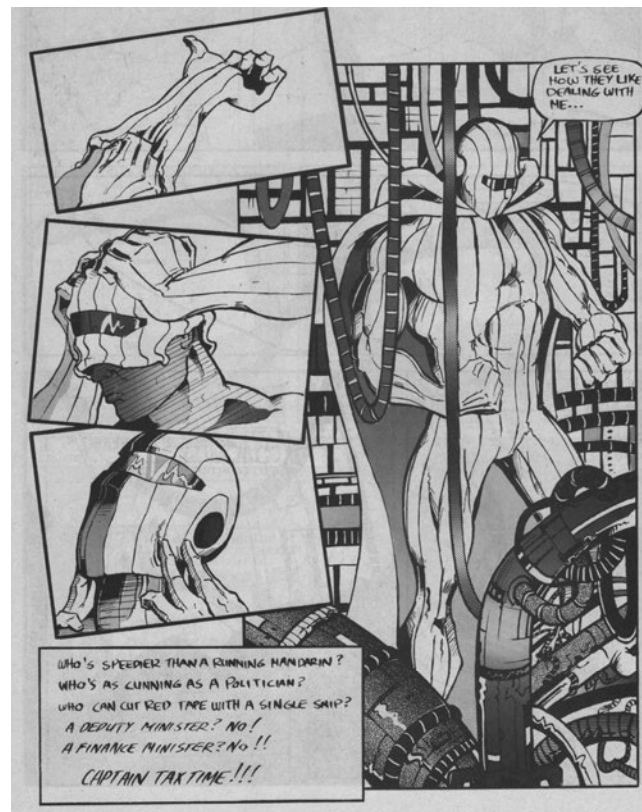


FIGURE 7.3 *Captain Tax Time* (1990). © 1990 Paul Haynes Comics.

Comix (late 1990s), created for the Washington State Department of Health, Captain Abstinence introduces stories featuring the superheroine Chastity, an attractive young woman in a surprisingly sexualized costume.

Then there are the environmental superheroes (some even predating the Captain Planet cartoon). Beginning in the late 1980s the U.S. Army published three Captain Conservo comic books to train soldiers how to conserve energy. In *Captain Bio: Clearing the Air* (1996), Captain Bio uses mostly nonviolent means to thwart bio-villains. *Captain Enviro: The Fight to Save the Maritimes!* (n.d.), produced for the Canadian Committee of Environment Ministers, presents the stalwart Captain's battles with Smog, Sludge, and other inhabitants of the Planet Polluto who are intent on befouling the beautiful Maritime Provinces of Canada.

WHICH ONE TO USE?

As with all the options available to you in the comics form, your purpose for creating the comic should guide your choice. If you want to influence mature readers about a serious topic you should probably use an Omniscient, Author, or Expert Narrator. If you want to keep younger readers interested and convey information without coming across as a school teacher, then it might be most effective to use a Celebrity Narrator accompanied by focalizers with characteristics similar to your readers.

Though it is rare in nonfiction comics, there can be multiple types of narration, and thus multiple points-of-view, in a comic. The “Heavy Water” story in *Two-Fisted Science* (1997) opens with omniscient narration, but on subsequent pages contains narration from the perspective of one of the main characters, Werner Heisenberg, that appears in caption boxes. *I Am the Guard* (1960) features three stories narrated by Expert Narrators who lived through the historical events they describe, but also contains short sections of additional information about the National Guard conveyed by an Omniscient Narrator.

DESCRIPTION: IMPARTING A SENSE OF PLACE

Every story takes place in a specific location in space and time. With nonfiction especially, it is the writer’s duty to recreate that place and moment for readers. In comics, this is done most obviously through art—thus the importance for comic artists to make frequent sketches and take reference photographs when visiting locations where the story is set, or meeting characters who are part of the action. But less obviously, setting is an act of careful observation and reporting. What are the visual details that most clearly anchor the story in place and time? How is a house in New Orleans different from a house in Nashville? What did a child’s football uniform look like in 1976 as opposed to 1987? What does a brick wall hit by a mortar shell really look like? While these things can often be sketched and photographed—and should be—the most telling details are often teased out through acts of thought and research.

If you are a writer working with an artist to create a nonfiction comic, your careful observation and reporting will help the artist arrange visual focus of the story’s scenes; if you are writer and artist both, you must sometimes step back from gathering images to think about how those images will best serve the needs of the story. In a 2004 lecture on his series *Palestine*, the comics journalist and artist Joe Sacco described his approach to setting as something more important than merely noting background details:

A prose journalist is probably going to mention these things, but he or she is not going to mention them at every paragraph, whereas with a cartoon, just by the fact that I have background I can play with, I can have these things—the mud, the graffiti. All of these things just follow the reader around wherever he or she

goes in each panel, so that it just creates an atmosphere. The reader is always there; there's always that graffiti, always that mud. It's not something you mention once and then you go on to the next subject, because I can always play with the backgrounds. I can always make it a presence, and that was important to me because when I was there, there was always a presence and obviously the Palestinians have to live through it. There's always a presence.

So how do you achieve that presence in your story? As Sacco indicates, it's important to physically visit the key scenes of your story whenever possible. This is essential in most journalism projects. Sometimes, of course, a direct visit is not possible, as when you are writing a history set in Renaissance Italy or a science comic explaining the functions of mitochondria—in such cases, careful research must often substitute for direct physical observation. Almost always, however, that research can include direct physical observation of details *similar* to those in your story. (For example, see Rick Geary's illustrations in Chapter 4 of a typical house in New Orleans, as he drew it before and after taking a trip to the city.)

If your project budget can't send you to Italy to study the setting for your history in person, find illustrated books of period architecture and costume, visit museums, watch documentaries, interview experts, and perhaps attend a local Renaissance

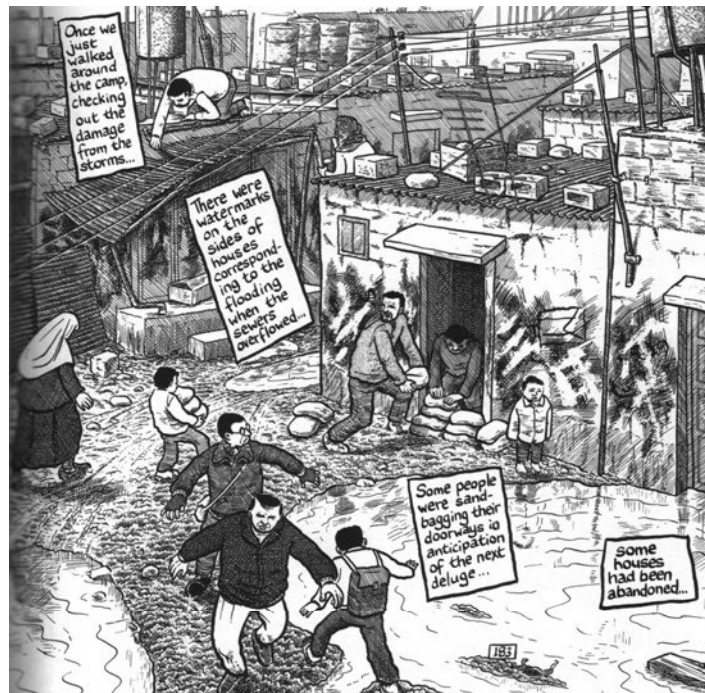


FIGURE 7.4 Joe Sacco's detailed backgrounds create a strong sense of place in Palestine (1993). © 1993; 2001 Joe Sacco, published by Fantagraphics Books.

fair. If your profile article includes a story your subject related in an interview about how she was affected by sailing as a child, ask her to describe the boat or perhaps even show you an old photo in an album. Then arrange to spend an afternoon on a sailboat similar in size and style to the one your subject described. (When drawn as a comic panel, remembered scenes like this will often include a quote from the interview in a box above the image; this serves as an unspoken cue to readers that the image is the artist's interpretation of the memory and may not necessarily depict the scene as it actually happened.) Whether you spend weeks in Palestine covering life amid warfare or a few of hours of research to get the boat scene just right, the end result should be a wealth of observed detail.

WHAT IS SETTING? NOVELIST R.W. RIDLEY EXPLAINS

Setting is not where your story takes place. I should say it's not only where your story takes place. I am sometimes shocked when even seasoned authors get the meaning of setting wrong. If you ask them their story's setting, they'll reply with a description that is more accurately applied to location. They may respond with "It's in the South," or "It takes place in the woods," or "It's on a farm." These are elements of setting, but they aren't the entire setting.

Setting is the condition of the barn. It's the twang in the local barber's voice. It's the thick canopy of the woods that allows for only slivers of light to seep through to the heavily rooted forest floor. Setting is that thing that anchors itself into readers' imaginations and helps them sink into the story. It's your background characters. It's the smells, the colors, and the weather. It's all those details that by themselves amount to nothing more than interesting factoids, but collectively they add compelling depth to your novel.

How you approach setting is as crucial as how you approach character and dialogue, yet it is the forgotten building block of storytelling. If you ask ten writers what their strong suit is, invariably they will say either creating three-dimensional characters or writing believable dialogue. Not one of them would say they are really good at crafting a fully realized setting that draws the reader in. And it's most likely not because they are lacking in that particular talent; it's simply because they may not consider it important enough to highlight.

It is. Setting is the soul of your story. If it's something you do well, proclaim it. It matters. If it's something you don't do well, improve upon it, and it will take your writing to the next level.

R.W. Ridley, who also writes as C. Hoyt Caldwell, is an award-winning author of young adult and Southern fiction. This article originally appeared on CreateSpace.com. Reprinted with permission. © 2014 CreateSpace, a DBA of On-Demand Publishing, LLC. All rights reserved.

THE DRAW METHOD: TRANSLATING OBSERVED DETAILS INTO SETTING AND CHARACTER

Narrowing the many possible details that *might* help create setting to those few that will fit within a printed or digital page can be a daunting task. Whether you have a sketchbook full of drawings, a swipe file full of period photos and design samples, a notebook full of written observations, or all of the above, you will need to carefully choose the elements that best serve the story to construct your narrative scenes. One method of doing this, first published thirty years ago by one of the authors of this book, is called DRAW, an acronym for Delineate, Ruminare, Analogize and Write. Although the method was designed to improve description and setting in nonfiction prose, repeated use has proven its effectiveness for many story forms, including nonfiction comics.

Just as an artist commissioned to paint a large canvas might make many sketches before tackling the final work, a writer can use short written sketches to discover which elements will best flesh out a scene, give it the feel of real life—the “presence” Sacco described. When you have spent a great deal of time gathering potential images, you can be overwhelmed by the blank page as a mass of different scenes compete in your mind. By using a simple, formulaic approach of short, timed exercises, you can begin to get something meaningful on the page quickly, allowing your subconscious knowledge of your subject to do all the sorting. You may already know which scenes of your story you intend to depict, or you may have several contenders. Repeating the DRAW process with each likely scene will give you short written sketches that can be assembled into a script for the unfolding action of your narrative.

Delineate—Make a List

Go through your reporting notes, sketches, reference photographs, and other material, writing down a scene’s sensory aspects: everything that can be seen, smelled, felt, tasted, or heard. Write each item on its own line on ruled paper, skipping two or three lines before the next item to leave room for later steps. On a computer, hit return three times after each entry.

Move quickly, allowing yourself no more than five minutes to get down as many sensory details as possible. Working against the clock will generate quantity of detail without paralyzing fear over quality, which will come in due course. The goal is to put images on paper as fast as they come. Don’t worry about spelling or sentence fragments; use as few words as possible. As the clock runs on, your sensory details may become more random and obscure. So much the better.

Ruminate—Summon a Vision

The timed delineation of the first step forces you to place yourself mentally within the scene. In order for the finished story to have verisimilitude—the appearance of life—you immerse yourself in your subject’s physical aspects.

The second step of DRAW is to ruminate (literally, to chew one's cud) on the list created in the first step. This is an exercise in mental focus. Take three minutes to mull over the list, then close your eyes and try to place yourself within the scene. Are there objects, details, or actions you had forgotten? The sound of an accent or nearby freeway? The smell of fried onions? What details pop into your mind that escaped your list? Open your eyes and add them. Often, the most telling images arise from rumination.

Analogize—What's it Like?

The next step is to take your now-expanded list and create a few analogies. Try to compare each item with some other thing, idea, or image that describes it in an unusual or creative manner. These comparisons should be written below each notation on your list. For example, if while sailing you noticed the way metal cams were used to lock the rope called the "sheet" into place, and while ruminating that image came to mind, your list might include the word "cams." As an analogy under that entry you might write, "Two spring loaded cams bit into the sheet like a pit bull with a chew toy, and the wind dragged the boat more quickly through the bay."

Don't worry about the technical definitions of simile and metaphor. Let your mind make whatever association it will—no connection is too silly or obscure. Again, this is a timed exercise; don't sweat any single entry. If you have trouble with one item, skip it and move down the list. These are not analogies to be included in your finished work so much as they are pathways leading you there.

Write—Sketch the Flesh

The final stage of the DRAW process is to write several descriptive sentences that make use of your observed details and one or two of your best analogies (but no more than that). Ignore the fact that the sentences may be unrelated to each other or to your intended message; they may wind up wholly unrelated to the subject matter. Try to create phrases and clauses as little pieces of art in and of themselves, assembling them into a written scene.

As you write, avoid the temptation to simply string together analogies. In addition to making the prose purple (that is, comically over-descriptive), repetition of "it was as blank as blank" gives a written scene a boring, sing-song quality. Instead, compare or contrast select items from your list. One strong analogy in a sketch can be far more evocative than five in a row. Try to make the sentences themselves fairly short and simple. If an item on your list contains a passive verb, try to make it active when you insert that item into your writing. The finished scene should move your descriptions from the general to the specific, from a rough image to a sharp, detailed rendering. What is written in this final step of the DRAW process is not nearly so important as that something is written—get some words on the page. Even if you

spend 30 minutes working through the four steps, you are far better off than the struggling writer who stares at a winking cursor for hours.

Description for its own sake is pointless. By performing the DRAW exercise with several key scenes from the narrative you have researched and reported, you should be able to place these scenes into a written script of the visual images to be used in your story. Think of it as a sort of reverse storyboard, a written document that can reveal the best presentation of setting, action, characterization, plot development, or essential background information within the narrative. Or all of the above. You may not use any of the actual writing produced in your sketch in the finished work. On the other hand, if a large panel depicting a town square or uncomfortable family dinner needs some written narration to help place it within the story, your two or three best lines from the exercise might provide just the ticket. But even if you use none of the writing the exercise produces, arranging your scenes in written narrative form can help you—or your partner, if you are a writer working with an artist—make the best choices of image and perspective, choices that will render the story with realism and life.

THE CHARACTER-DRIVEN STORY: A BRIEF HISTORY

The idea that journalism and memoir can be as immersive, exciting, and fun to read as a novel is relatively recent in contemporary publishing, yet it is also as old as humanity itself. Explaining how notions of fiction and nonfiction diverged requires a little history. Stories have existed throughout human history—some might argue that telling stories is part of the essence of what being “human” means. But separation of fact and fiction is a historically recent phenomenon, tied to technology and the development of print media. In ancient times, epics like the *Iliad* or *Laxdæla Saga* may have been based at least partially on true stories, but any historical truth was embellished and changed over many retellings to the point that only legend remained.

Like ancient myths, early European books became popular more because of story than fact. *The Travels of Marco Polo*, based on and widely published as fact nearly 300 years before the invention of the printing press, was generally read as fiction—readers enjoyed fanciful descriptions of the Orient, but seldom accepted that a rock could burn or that a single emperor controlled vast, unknown swaths of the planet. The book that many critics regard as the first novel, *Don Quixote* by Miguel de Cervantes, was first published in 1605. It purported to be a true account of a knight errant and his faithful squire, although readers of the day understood it to be fiction. *Robinson Crusoe*, a wholly invented story published in 1719 by Daniel Defoe, was read by many as the true account of a sailor who had actually been a castaway for four years on a deserted island, but once again, story counted more than truth. For the first two centuries of printed books, readers seemed to make little distinction between fact and fantasy.

It wasn't until cheaper paper and printing made newspapers popular in the nineteenth century that fiction and nonfiction began to separate in the public sphere and in the common practices of writers. Even then, early reporters often

used the techniques of fiction—interesting characters, action-filled stories, unusual settings, the writer’s strong personal point of view—to tell true stories. (Or sometimes “mostly” true stories—newspaper reporters like the young Mark Twain were known to embellish truth for the sake of humor.) But starting late in the nineteenth century, newspaper reporting changed because of technology and economics. The development of the telegraph gave rise to wire services that could rapidly dispatch news to many papers at once. Because these papers might have very different political leanings, wire service reporters were encouraged to report “just the facts,” with no opinion or personal observations. Printing presses were able to easily reproduce photographs, which gave rise to photojournalism and the idea of reporters capturing the world as it existed. The public began to embrace the belief that news sources should be impartial and free of emotion.

Just as popular nonfiction was becoming imbued with a sense of sameness, fiction became ever more interesting. Starting in the 1890s, young reporters like Stephen Crane and Jack London observed social injustice and hypocrisy in the society wrought by industrial revolution and switched to fiction to explore these ideas. Their gritty, realistic writing style—strongly influenced by newspaper work and an intentional rejection of the flowery, refined language of the Romantics—became known as *naturalism*, and it caught on. In Europe, novelists like Joseph Conrad and H.G. Wells critiqued colonialism, the rise of technology, sexual repression, and faults of the Victorian Age. The naturalists in turn influenced novelists of the early twentieth century like Ernest Hemingway, F. Scott Fitzgerald and John Steinbeck. Thus, in the public mind, fiction was where you turned for story, character, and big ideas; newspapers were just for facts.

With the invention of radio and the creation of government regulations to control broadcast frequencies, the popular notions of impartial reporting began to be codified—at least in some cases—as law. The emergence of television, with only a few networks in the U.S. and most other countries delivering nightly news to an audience of millions, further eroded the ability of reporters to tell good stories (with perhaps the occasional exception of celebrated war correspondents like Ernie Pyle and Edward R. Murrow, who gave gripping first-hand accounts of battle). Personal essayists like E.B. White or James Thurber might be allowed creative nonfiction rambles in magazines like *The New Yorker*, but by and large the Truth (with a capital T) of journalism was regarded as too important to allow for creativity, which remained with the novelists. The world had become too complex and dangerous for true stories to be told in a fictional manner.

This attitude cemented a general dullness in the journalism of the mid-twentieth century, broken only by occasional magazine nonfiction forays by novelists like Hemingway, James Agee, and John Hersey (and perhaps by a few educational comics, as noted in Chapter 2). One need only watch recorded newscasts or television programs from the 1950s to realize that the decade’s general dullness extended to a great many things beyond the way news was presented. The stage was set for the coming social upheaval and creative explosion of the 1960s, and in

nonfiction the upheaval gave rise to a literary movement that continues to influence the process of nonfiction storytelling more than half a century later.

THE NEW JOURNALISM

In several books and articles, Tom Wolfe has chronicled the birth, largely among a group of young newspaper writers in New York City, of what came to be called New Journalism: a nonfiction style driven by strong characters, narrative storytelling, realistic dialogue, and a focus on themes of status and social conflict—in short, the same elements that characterized the novels of the naturalism movement. Wolfe claimed to have first noticed the “new” style in a 1962 magazine article by Gay Talese about the aging prize fighter Joe Louis. The article opened with an exchange of dialogue between the fighter and his wife at home—nothing at all like a typical magazine profile of the day. The story moved in fictional style from scene to scene, “showing the private life of a sports hero growing older, balder, sadder.”

From the beginning, Wolfe wondered how Talese had found such intimate details of his subject’s life. The work read so much like fiction, it seemed it had to be invented. But the story, Wolfe learned, was true. Talese had arranged his reporting to gather not so much facts as *scenes*, hanging out with Louis, asking him personal questions that would help recreate the fighter as a literary protagonist. Talese had strung the scenes together in the style of realistic fiction, using a close third-person point of view that did more than reveal the character of Joe Louis: through its intense, personal focus, the story subtly addressed social issues of celebrity, race, and the loss of youth in 1962 America. The discovery, Wolfe wrote, came as a revelation, not only to him, but to dozens of other mostly young nonfiction writers (many of whom, Wolfe claimed, also dreamed of becoming novelists, as Wolfe himself successfully did decades later).

After analyzing the works of many new journalists in the 1960s and ’70s, Wolfe developed **four tenets of New Journalism**—rules that continue to be followed by writers seeking to give their nonfiction the literary style and heft of a good novel. They are:

- 1) **Scene-by-scene construction.** The story unfolds in a series of character-driven scenes; at the center of each scene, someone is doing something. Very little information appears in the form of exposition, history, statistics, or other reporting, unless that information can be presented within the person point of view of the main character, or folded almost invisibly within the description and action of a particular scene. Much of the back-story must be inferred by readers, who can rely on the detailed clues of the moving narrative.
- 2) **Close third-person point of view.** As Wolfe first observed it, the best of the new journalism articles and books focused on some character who was not the author, with each scene progressing in that character’s point of view. Readers could see not only the actions of the protagonist, but see his or her

thoughts, hopes, and fears as well. The writer achieved this without invention, but through careful interviews, asking questions like, “What was going through your mind at that moment? What were your thoughts when X happened?” Instead of quoting these answers, as a traditional journalist would, the writer uses them as the basis of point of view within the progress of the scene. Some writers, Wolfe observed, were able to pull off new journalism stories successfully in the first person point of view (and as noted below, one of those writers, by taking first person to extreme levels, forever changed what the phrase “New Journalism” itself meant to many readers). But from the stories chosen for his 1973 anthology *The New Journalism* and opinions expressed elsewhere, Wolfe clearly favored third-person writing over telling one’s own story.

- 3) **Realistic dialogue.** Much of the story moves through conversation, accurately rendered. For the typical story, this meant that the reporter would have to follow the daily life of a profile subject or subjects, in order to be present when conversation occurred. In some cases, it meant careful interviews to reconstruct past dialogue.
- 4) **Status life.** Wolfe claimed that this was the most important of the four tenets and also the least understood. In creating setting, character, and dialogue, Wolfe felt the writer should focus on details and nuance that reveal “the entire pattern of behavior and possessions through which people express their position in the world or what they think it is or what they hope it to be.” This means paying close attention to clothing, hairstyle, manners of speech and habit, furnishings, brand names for everything from sneakers to sunglasses, eating habits, hobbies, entertainment, architecture—anything that fixes a scene and its characters in a particular time, place, income level, political or religious affiliation, education, entertainment preference, and so on.

All four of these elements became a mainstay of much of the narrative nonfiction published since the 1970s—and by extension, influenced many of the more recent creators of nonfiction comics. One contemporary of Wolfe who wrote always in the first person took his definition of new journalism a step further, in the process gaining a large following, while providing ample ammunition for critics who claim the form strays too far from the literal truth: Hunter S. Thompson. In articles for *Rolling Stone* and other magazines as well as several bestselling books, Thompson developed a style he called **Gonzo Journalism**, in which the often outrageous experiences of the narrator become the story, rather than the ostensible “facts” the narrator sets out to report. Although Thompson made this style appear effortless, some contemporary writers who have imitated him come across as overly self-indulgent or farcical. In part, this may be because Thompson’s writing was intentionally counter-cultural at the height of the counter-cultural movement of the late 1960s, but it is also because stylistically he develops narrative situations that readers would not necessarily want to experience, but which they can easily imagine experiencing, and he



FIGURE 7.5 A gonzo journalism approach from “Voyage to the End of the Library” in *Notes from a Defeatist* (2003). © 2003 Joe Sacco, published by Fantagraphics Books.

does so with ample humor and wit. Among creators of nonfiction comics, Joe Sacco reached gonzo moments in some of his early nonfiction comics (see Figure 7.5).

Memoirists like R. Crumb and Harvey Pekar have also written comics containing elements of gonzo journalism (although they often veer so far afield of fact that even the phrase “gonzo” cannot pull them back to the world of journalism). Thompson’s stories were typically set among real events widely covered by traditional reporters, but his stated goal was often to uncover some deeper “truth” that the ordinary journalists would miss. “But what was the story? Nobody had bothered to say,” Thompson writes in his gonzo classic, *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* (Thompson, 12). “So we would have to drum it up on our own. Free Enterprise. The American Dream. Horatio Alger gone mad on drugs in Las Vegas. Do it now: pure Gonzo journalism.”

THE MEMOIR—AND THE PROBLEM WITH AUTHENTICITY

As the above discussion suggests, absolute authenticity is impossible to achieve in a memoir comic. A story about the past, even the author’s first-hand experience of that past, can only present an approximation of the experience. This is true for a

number of reasons, some of which apply to all memoirs and some that are specific to the comics form.

- 1) **Memory is imperfect and often self-serving.** Cognitive dissonance theory holds that most people engage in selective recall, tending to remember the details that justify their decisions and tending to forget information that makes them feel uncomfortable. You might be thinking, “But I know people who are always recalling memories that make them uncomfortable.” One of the authors of this book had a creative writing professor who told him “you’re never going to be a great writer unless you suffer.” So for some people forgetting the happy moments and dwelling on the tragedy might be self-serving. The point is that memory, whether happy or sad, is selective rather than comprehensive.
- 2) **Everyone perceives the world through a unique perceptual filter,** a complex web of beliefs, attitudes, and values created by culture, personal experience, and the very vocabulary with which people label experiences. Even journalists who feel a responsibility to strive for objectivity—considering the facts without being influenced by feelings or opinions—realize that absolute objectivity is an unobtainable goal for humans. In the 1960s some New Journalists claimed the emphasis on objectivity imposes a moral neutrality that presents facts, but does not adequately represent the truth (Newfield 1974, 64). About the same time postmodern philosophers were declaring it is impossible for us to step outside of our own perceptual filter, our own subjectivity. Writing about oneself is about the most subjective thing one can do, and “presenting one’s past is expressionistic and interpretive; it is not unfiltered” (Versaci 2007, 60).
- 3) **Molding memories into a coherent narrative often requires telling less and sometimes more than what is actually remembered.** Some, usually a great deal, of condensing is required in storytelling. Even in relating a brief moment, you would not want to try to convey every detail you saw, every thought you had, every movement of your body. Providing a catalogue of all these memories would certainly undermine the excitement or pathos of an incident.

On the other hand, telling a story based solely on memory would be like watching an old celluloid film that had been damaged; the images would be scratchy, jerky, with many of the frames missing. Such movies have to be restored before they are watchable; to create a coherent and interesting story you have to “restore” the past by supplementing what you remember. For instance, you are unlikely to remember past conversations word for word, so when you have people interacting on the page it is almost always necessary to invent dialogue that conveys the essence of the conversation. (In some cases, as explained below, you can reconstruct that dialogue through

interviews with others—although you may be trading your own faulty memory for the faulty memories of those you interview.)

- 4) **The presentation of the past is shaped by the comics art form.** A drawing is, at best, an abstraction of reality. Before Photoshop®, people had a tendency to consider the photograph as a sort of objective truth. A photograph has an indexical relationship to what was photographed—it “proves” (as the Cottingley fairies hoax of 1917 demonstrated, it has long been possible to manipulate photographs) a person or object exists in reality. A photograph possesses *iconicity*—it resembles (at least in two dimensions) the person or object photographed. A drawing in a comic book does not enjoy the same truth claim.

The artist might be drawing from imagination, thus the drawing is not a reproduction of reality. Even if the artist is drawing while looking at an actual object or model, the resultant work will have been shaped by creative choices, style, skill, medium, and subjectivity. The act of drawing constantly involves creative choices: How much of something to draw; The angle from which to draw it; How to simulate light and shadow; Which detail to leave out.

Some of the creative choices are stylistic choices. A drawing is never neutral; it is always a unique style. A drawing of an object done with clean, crisp lines emphasizing contours is going to create a very different impression from a drawing of the same object using a sketchy line and



FIGURE 7.6A A straightforward depiction of Richard Nixon from “Brotherhood of the Magic Bullet” by Kirk-Albert Etienne in *The Big Book of Conspiracies* (1995). © 1995 DC Comics.



FIGURE 7.6B A caricature of Nixon from *Bumf* (2014). © 2014 Joe Sacco, published by Fantagraphics Books.

techniques such as stippling and hatching to create texture. A style is a result of many factors, including purpose—the artist wanting to accurately represent the natural world or to express an emotional response—tools (pen, charcoal, brush, Cintiq tablet, etc.), techniques, and the limitations of the artist's skill.

Some artists can move freely across a huge range of styles, but others are more comfortable sticking with a style that fits their abilities. Some very skilled artists will avoid drawings those things—cars, horses, bare feet—that they do not draw well. Sometimes a drawing does not reflect the way an artist wished to represent something, but rather the way he could represent it. (See the discussion of Josh Neufeld's style in Chapter 4.)

When an artist exhibits a strong attitude, a predisposed positive or negative evaluation, toward someone or something, that artist's drawing of that person or object is going to present a very subjective reality. An American liberal is going to undertake a drawing of Sarah Palin with a different attitude than she might undertake when drawing Michelle Obama, and the resultant images are likely to manifest a very subjective disdain or reverence.

It is impossible to represent all aspects of an event or a phenomenon in a limited number of static comics panels. Comics are reductive in creation. The process of encapsulation always involves choices about which aspects of a story to show and which aspects to leave out. Likewise, the layout of a comic book page creates meaning based on relationships. The sequencing and juxtaposition of moments or incidents invariably implies relationships between those moments or incidents. Scott McCloud claims that even between what seem like non-sequitur, or totally unrelated panels, "a relationship of some sort will inevitably develop" and readers will "find meaning or resonance" (1993, 73). The relationships that readers perceive and the meanings they create might not be intended by the author, and almost certainly do not accurately reflect chaotic and complex experience. The very shape of the comics form is shaping the representation of the past.

Elements of composition create a context for reader interpretation. A mere glance at the details of the pictures on a page or screen can create expectations about the time period in which the story is set. A cursory examination of elements of style such as the quality of the line work, the use of shading and color, or the degree of realism or abstraction can create a context (serious, playful, disturbing, etc.) for what a reader expects from the comic.

- 5) **Some comics memoirists are more concerned with emotions than they are with facts.** A number of memoirists working in the comics form seem to share Phoebe Gloeckner's belief that "factual truth has little significance in the pursuit of emotional truth" (2011, 179). The work of memoirists such as

Lynda Barry, G.B. Tran, and Craig Thompson can be very expressionistic, not so much concerned with showing exactly how things looked in a particular situation, but rather giving a sense of how the author felt in that situation. (And whenever fiction and reality mix, the memoirist can encounter both legal and ethical problems, as discussed in Chapter 10.)

- 6) **Memoirs are sometimes treated as literature rather than history.** Some authors are applying the standards of literature to their memoirs rather than the standards of history or journalism. The story they tell might be inspired by and directly incorporate some aspects of their personal experience, but their purpose is to tell a compelling story. They are more concerned with conveying eternal truths about the human condition than they are about relating historically accurate details.

Many comics designated as memoir are not purely true, but neither are they purely fiction. They are often what has been dubbed autofiction, the intermingling of fiction with factual accounts (Doubrosky 1977). If you move too far along that autofiction continuum, away from history and toward fiction, then you are producing work that is beyond the scope of this book. Rather, one of the reasons this book exists is to offer approaches, techniques, and ethical standards for authors striving to produce authentic, which is to say, nonfiction, memoirs, at least to the extent that can be diligently reached in an art form than can never be wholly true.

WRITING DIALOGUE—YOU TALKING TO ME?

In articles, it is a quote if one person speaks to the writer, but it is dialogue if two or more people are speaking to each other as though the writer is not there. The writer becomes invisible, spying on the conversation and writing it down or recording it exactly as it occurs. This is a very important skill in constructing narrative scenes. If you are ever in an airport bookstore or library and can observe people thumbing through books, trying to choose some pleasure reading, you will invariably see them stop on a page that is loaded with dialogue.

Humans are natural voyeurs—we like spying on others and listening to their conversations. Moreover, movies, television, and theatre have conditioned us to follow stories that unfold through dialogue. If your nonfiction scenes are based solely on researched facts and expert interviews, you will rob them of one of the most powerful tools of storytelling. Finding and recreating factual dialogue—real conversations between real people—can be difficult and fraught with factual, literary, and ethical pitfalls. But there are several steps you can take during the information-gathering phase of your project to reproduce accurate dialogue that can advance your story, as in an action movie or mystery novel.

Try to arrange your reporting so you can overhear dialog—ask whether you can “observe” processes; hang around places where subjects gather, especially in social

settings; and hang around a subject's workplace after each interview is finished (taking a tour, getting coffee in the cafeteria, etc.). Your goal is to observe conversations, and write them down later. Take exact notes of what people say, bad grammar, swear words, sentence fragments, and all. Consider recording conversations if you cannot remember or write them down accurately, but with this warning: do not record overheard conversations electronically unless you have been given permission to do so by the speakers. Some locations have laws prohibiting hidden recording devices, and publication of conversations that people thought were private can in some cases lead to lawsuits for invasion of privacy. Even if a recorded conversation happens to present no legal challenge, most would consider using it without permission unethical. The same is true if during the course of reporting you find an old video (or a recent one online) that catches a conversation you might want to reconstruct—you should learn the circumstances under which the video was shot, and obtain written permission from both the photographer and the subjects before using the dialogue in your story.

Sometimes while you are interviewing a profile subject or key character, that person will refer to a specific conversation that took place in the past. If that conversation would present a dramatic moment or an event likely to serve a narrative purpose in your finished story, follow up with interview questions designed to give you everything you will need to reconstruct the scene: What were your exact words? Who was present? Where did this conversation take place? What year? What time of day? How would you describe the scene? Do you remember what you were wearing?

After getting your interview subject to walk you through a scene slowly, step by step, try to find contact information for anyone who took part in or witnessed the conversation, if any of the participants are still living—they might not remember it the same way as your interview subject. Even if they do, you might want to present the remembered conversation in your finished comic in a way that makes clear the scene is based on memory (which is always fallible). For example, a line at the top of the drawn conversation scene might read, "John remembers that one fall afternoon when he was twelve his older brother stopped him on the way home from the bus stop after school . . ."

Here is part of a conversation between a father, Irby, and son, Sheck, from a profile article in *Sports Illustrated* magazine written by one of the authors of this book. The profile subject, Sheck Exley, was a noted cave diver who had perished while trying to set a world scuba depth record. His father recalled the conversation more than twenty years after it took place, in an interview taped on the day of his son's funeral. The dialogue itself came from the interview. The scenic details were gathered with a site visit and additional reporting conducted in the days after the interview, and written in Sheck's point of view:

Today he has come home with his business degree. The swamp across the street has been drained, has begun to fill with increasingly prosperous-looking homes. The walls of his father's office have been covered with plaques and certificates,

all testifying to a community pillar: head of the Jacksonville Chamber of Commerce, Chairman of the annual United Way drive, Sunday school teacher at the Ortega Methodist Church. Sheck sits across from the desk, waiting for his father to come home.

Irby closes the door and sits down. "You wanted to talk?"

"Dad, I'd like a job."

The older man nods. "All right. I've got a question to ask." He looks his son in the eye. "Do you want a job, or do you want a career?"

"What's the difference?"

"Son, a job is coming in at eight, punching the clock, and at five o'clock you punch the clock and leave. If you want to develop a career, you come in at eight o'clock, punch the clock, and at five o'clock, if the business needs you there to do something, you stay and do it for the good of the company. If you want to sit in my chair at my desk, you've got to earn the right. If it's a Friday afternoon, and you see that there's a company need for you to come in the next day, you come in the next day. Even if you have a diving project planned. Now that is the difference between having a job and developing a career."

"Well, I want that. That's fine." They shake hands.

The reporting process can produce many potential instances of dialogue for your story. Even in prose, too much dialogue can stall rather than advance the story; in comics form, where each line of speech is typically written in a word balloon, too much dialogue can be far worse than too little, because it becomes a visual distraction. You should thus carefully select for inclusion only dialogue that accomplishes one or all of the following tasks (ranked by priority):

- 1) Directly advances story
- 2) Reveals character, especially region, status, or profession
- 3) Conveys conflict, strong emotion, surprise, or humor

In the above example, the course of the son's life began to change when he went to work for his father. The nature and location of the conversation reveals region, status, religious affiliations, and the differing passions of father and son—all precursors to conflicts that emerge later in the article. But even this conversation would need to be boiled down to its essence to tell the same story in comics form. When you obtain dialogue through reporting, if one speaker goes on for more than two or three lines, summarize or cut the speech. As with quotes from experts and interview subjects, directly quote only the good stuff. In a long conversation, skip ahead with a summary, or simply by moving to a new panel.

A LIST OF GRAPHIC NOVELS IN/ON/ABOUT/USING (THE) MEDIA

The following widely available books are not just good examples of nonfiction in comics form; they are all about some aspect of media, and can illuminate some of the media tools and issues discussed in this chapter.

Joe Sacco's work

Jessica Abel

Gladstone, Neufield

Blutch

Matt Silday

Lappe, Goldman

Andi Watson

Joyce Brabner

Olexa, Axe

Axe, Bors

Radio: An Illustrated Guide

The Influencing Machine

So Long Silver Screen

The Homeless Channel

Shooting War

Slow News Day

Brought to Light, Real War Stories

War Fix

War is Boring



FIGURE 7.7 Mediated communication permeates *The Dark Knight Returns* (1986) by Frank Miller and Lynn Varley. © 1986 DC Comics.

(Continued)

Guibert, Lefèvre, Lemerrier	<i>The Photographer</i>
John Hickman	<i>The Nightly News</i>
Michel Rabagliati	<i>Paul Moves Out</i>
Jacobson, Colon	<i>The 9/11 Report</i>
Ari Folman	<i>Waltz with Bashir</i>
Long, Demonakos, Powell	<i>The Silence of our Friends</i>
Various	<i>World War 3 Illustrated</i>
Howard Chaykin	<i>American Flagg!</i>
Fraction, Chaykin	<i>Satellite Sam</i>
Moore, Gibbons	<i>Watchmen</i>
Miller, Janson, Varley	<i>The Dark Knight Returns</i>
Miller, Gibbons	<i>Martha Washington</i>
Eddie Campbell	<i>The Fate of the Artist</i>
Kim Deitch	<i>Alias the Cat</i>
Cord Scott (resource)	<i>Comics and Conflict (comics war propaganda)</i>
Guy Delisle	<i>Shenzhen</i>

EXPOSITION

All narratives, even pure fiction, from literary novel to action movie, contain some exposition, because readers and viewers occasionally need background information in order to understand the context in which actions occur. Exposition simply means providing an explanation or description. Pure exposition lacks the defining characteristics of narrative—there are no characters performing actions, no setting, and no events happening in a temporal sequence. You have probably had your enjoyment of a story diminished by awkward, unnatural sounding dialogue as a character lapsed into a textbook-like explanation of how the bomb might be disarmed, or where the legend of the werewolf began. It can be difficult to fit exposition seamlessly within a narrative.

The challenge is even greater for nonfiction narratives. Nonfiction, especially when the purpose is education, tends to rely heavily on exposition. Among the types of exposition typically found in nonfiction comics are visualized data, procedural exposition, scientific exposition, and argumentative exposition.

Probably the most common types of visualized data are the graphs and charts we associate with business presentations. Visualized data can be useful because it is a shorthand way of revealing the patterns and trends in complex data sets.

The back-of-the-box instructions for preparing a frozen pizza provide an example of procedural exposition in text form. Procedures can also be explained with pictures (e.g. airplane instruction cards for how to use your seat as a flotation device).

Efforts to disseminate scientific information to non-scientists have for centuries relied heavily on illustration. Scientific exposition often appears in nonfiction

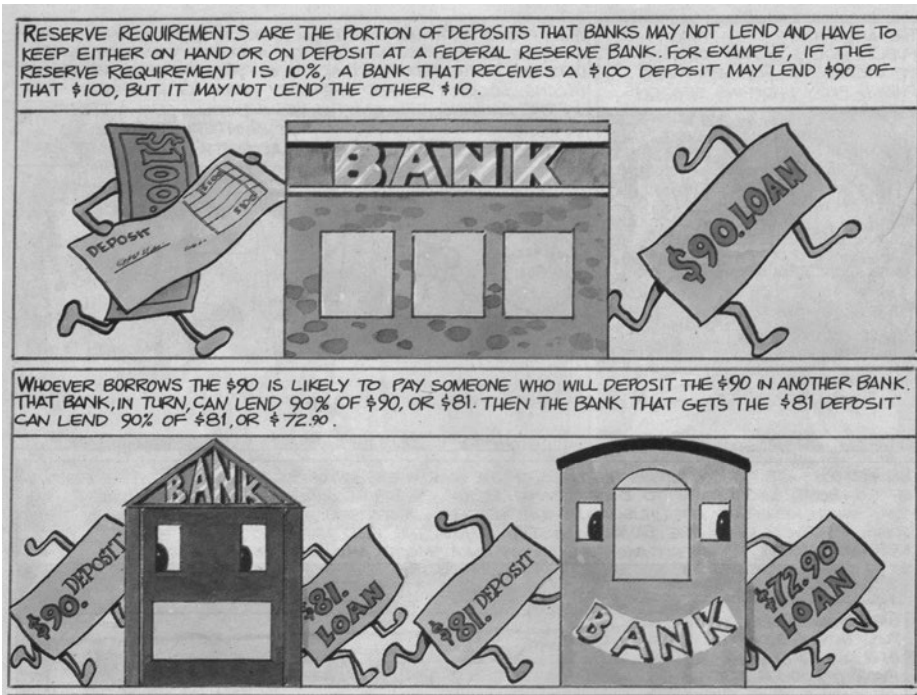


FIGURE 7.8 Visualized data in *The Story of Monetary Policy* (2002). © 2002 Federal Reserve Bank of New York.

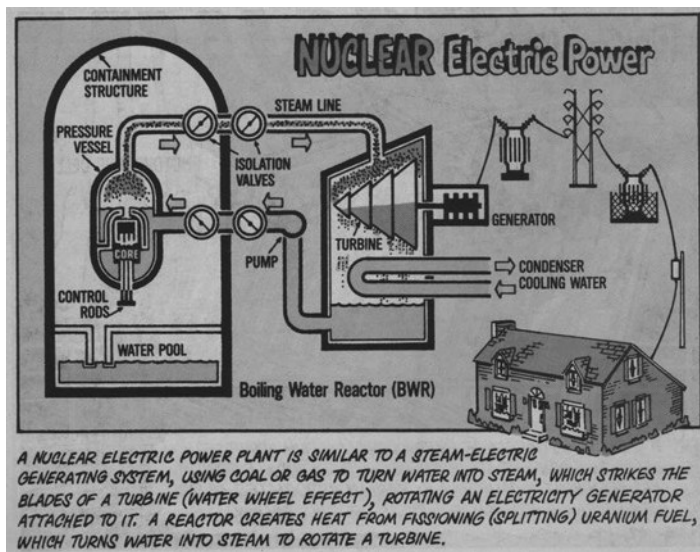


FIGURE 7.9 A sparse narrative accompanies pages of scientific illustration in *History of Electronics* (1987). © 1987 Tandy Corporation; Radio Shack, Inc.

comics as a visual aid used by an Expert Narrator or Experienced Character within the world of the story. A popular narrative structure in comics meant to educate about a scientific topic is the fantastic journey in which “the action takes place within the scientific illustration” (Jüngst 189).

Argumentative exposition is the use of evidence and reasoning presented in a legal prosecution or defense or in support of a belief, policy, or value system. For centuries, lawyers and politicians have found that argumentative exposition is easier for people to visualize and more emotionally potent when it is folded into a narrative. This is essentially true of all exposition: Readers can swallow it more easily when it is hidden within the action and character development of a gripping story. A spoonful of sugar really does help the medicine go down.

PETER KUPER

(Composited from email interviews conducted March 3, 2010 and September 24, 2013)

Peter Kuper's illustrations and comics appear regularly in *Time*, *Newsweek*, and *The New York Times*. He writes and draws the *Spy vs. Spy* strip for *Mad* each month. Kuper is co-founder of the political comix magazine *World War 3 Illustrated*. He has written and illustrated many books including *Comics Trips*, *Mind's Eye*, and *The System*.



Duncan: Have you done work you consider to be comics journalism?

Kuper: *Diario De Oaxaca* includes comic/illustrated journalism on the teacher's strike that took place in Oaxaca, Mexico in 2006. I also did a piece for *World War 3 Illustrated* on Oaxaca as well as several others mixing personal and journalism in stories. Arguably, my adaptation of Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle* falls in that category as well.

Duncan: If you want readers to accept what you are telling them as true, are there certain things you can do (particularly in the comics form) to create a sense of authenticity?

Kuper: Use direct quotes.

Duncan: What do you think can be gained from creating a comic about an event rather than just writing about the event?

(Continued)

- Kuper:** Subjects that might be overlooked are made more accessible. Often the artist is part of the story, which personalizes the subject and puts a human face on issues that are otherwise just one more news story about horrible events in some distant land.
- Duncan:** Snapping pictures of an event takes only seconds, but drawing a number of panels depicting the event can be quite laborious. Why is creating a comic worth the extra time? What does the comics form offer that photography does not?
- Kuper:** Time is an important element. The artist is forced to participate in the situation and there tends to be more information in a drawing that gives a deeper sense of the event.
A photo can be taken on the run and the photographer can do so without any intersection with the subject. In a drawing done on the spot this is impossible.
In Mexico I spent hours doing drawings of the strikers and this was a way to communicate with them (and their children) when language failed me. They were warm and open given time for their initial suspicion to pass once they saw what I was doing. By the end they were offering me a chair and their kids were sitting in my lap. The time involved also made me appreciate an aspect of what they were doing encamped for weeks or months in the street. The smells, the burning sun, the back ache, got into the drawing.
Later that day I walked by a barricade set up by strikers and snapped a photo. They surrounded me, and angrily demanded the film. They felt threatened and robbed. (When it was clear I was just a stupid gringo they let me go.) It demonstrated to me the vast gulf between the two actions.
- Duncan:** Why do you choose to do first-person comics reportage, injecting yourself into the story?
- Kuper:** It gives the reader an in. I am the stand-in for the reader, and that allows them to feel closer to the subject and hopefully understand more about it.
- Duncan:** In your autobiographical and semi-autobiographical work is it more important for you to convey the facts of an event or the emotional truth of an event?
- Kuper:** Emotional truth, but often they are one and the same.
- Duncan:** Did you sometimes alter an event in the telling (e.g., change setting, eliminate people, combine people into a single “character,” change the sequence of actions)?
- Kuper:** There certainly was some condensing and just by cherry-picking events I was directing aspects of the reality to make it a more streamlined read.

(Continued)

- Duncan:** You called *Stripped* an “unauthorized autobiography.” The oxymoron is funny, but does it also speak to some deeper truth about how you felt about the material.
- Kuper:** Yes. I found myself compelled to tell these stories even though the other me thought I was crazy.
- Duncan:** Much of the content of *Stripped* was used in *Stop Forgetting to Remember*. Revisiting this material more than a decade later, what sort of changes did you make?
- Kuper:** I introduce a character named Todd suggesting we were new parents meeting for the first time, when the reality was he is based on an old friend. It just worked more dramatically that way. Of course I also had the conceit that the whole book was a graphic novel work in progress I was trying to get published, when the reality was I had about five books published during that period. For this and other reasons I made it the autobiography of an alter-ego named Walter Kurtz. Though it’s 93 percent accurate to actual events this seemed like a fair way to indicate I’d made some changes. This ended up being a sticking point for some readers, so when it was published in Spanish and French I restored my name. I should have done this the whole time, since apparently people were more interested in me using my own name than the absolute accuracy of the story.
- Duncan:** Were there aspects of the material that made you uncomfortable (too revealing, not honest enough, immature, self-serving, etc.) when you revisited it?
- Kuper:** Absolutely. That’s why I was glad I did this when I did. It came from a frame of mind that was particular to the age when I drew it. It fulfilled the “Stop Forgetting to Remember” title since I probably would have forgotten many of the details of my life had I not committed it to paper when I did. It is so easy to get disassociated from your past and forget as you get older. There can be a desire to distance yourself from particularly crazy behavior in your youth, since it seems remote from your adult self—especially as a parent. Thanks to those comics, I can’t deny my past now.

FINAL ASSEMBLY: WRITING THE SCRIPT

Once you have gathered and refined the basic material for your story, you are ready to write the script. Creating a comics script is more than writing words. It also requires decisions about the visual aspect: What needs to be shown (encapsulation) and how it should be shown (layout and composition). Your approach to creating a script is going to depend on the degree and nature of collaboration involved in creating the comic.

Here are some of the collaborative possibilities:

A cartoonist, someone who both writes and draws, might do the entire comic, including lettering and coloring, without assistance from anyone else. For example, Rick Geary is responsible for every aspect of his graphic novels about notorious murders. “I start by reading as much as I can about the subject and compiling copious notes,” says Geary. “The next step is to organize all this information into the outline of a narrative and break it down into pages. Then comes the writing of the script, followed by pencils, lettering and inks” (Baker 2013).

Some cartoonists work with assistants. This might simply be someone who does the lettering or the coloring, or it could be a more substantive collaboration in which the cartoonist does rough layouts and assistants do the finished pencils and inks. It used to be that comics creators hoped to become successful enough that they could hire assistants. In some cases, uncredited assistants who could mimic the cartoonist’s style did the bulk of the creative work. However, the alternative comics community has developed a mindset that values a single vision rendered by a single creator. Readers would feel betrayed if they were to discover a beloved cartoonist was passing someone else’s work off as her own. Contemporary memoir comics are usually the work of a single creator.

Many educational comics are created by a writer–artist team. Sometimes, especially if the comic is created by or in conjunction with a mainstream publisher such as Marvel or DC, a larger team of creators is involved. The *New Teen Titans Drug Awareness Special* (1983) comic book was produced in the same manner as most mainstream superhero comics, by a full team of five creators.

Most of the well-known superhero comics are created with an industrial model of collaboration. In this approach the comic is created by a team of creators, each performing a specialized task. This typically consists of a writer, a penciller, an inker, a colorist, and a letterer. It is unusual for a nonfiction comic book to be produced in the industrial model. However, *Nelson Mandela: The Authorized Comic Book*, which was funded by a number of sponsors and produced by the comics publisher Umlando Wezithombe, was created by ten comics professionals, many of whom contributed to multiple tasks. Pitshou Mampa, for example, did part of the layouts and was the lead penciller, but also helped with the inking and coloring.

There are two common approaches to scripting, the **treatment/synopsis approach** and the **full script**. Choose the one that is appropriate for the nature of your collaboration.

TREATMENT/SYNOPSIS APPROACH

This approach is often referred to as the Marvel Method because it was developed at Marvel Comics in the 1960s when editor-in-chief Stan Lee was writing most of the titles Marvel published. If the books were to be published on time, Lee could not have artists sitting around waiting for him to write full scripts. He wrote up, or sometime just told them, the broad outlines of a story and let his talented artists

decide how to break it down into panels and pages. After the story was penciled, Lee put in the dialogue. This approach works well for a fictional story that a gifted visual storyteller (Lee's artists included Jack Kirby and Steve Ditko!) can shape, often taking it in interesting directions the writer did not anticipate. However, for some types of nonfiction, especially reporting or documentary comics, the chronology of events should not be altered and visual representations need to be as accurate as possible. Because the artist cannot be given too much flexibility to interpret events in such comics, it is probably best to use a full script method.

FULL SCRIPT

There is no standard format for a comic book or graphic novel script. If you visit the Comic Book Script Archive website or the submissions pages of various comic book publishers (the sample script at the Dark Horse Comics website is pretty easy to locate) you will find variety of formats. Unless you are working for a publisher that demands a particular format, you should use whichever scripting format makes sense to you.

Even within the full script approach there are a range of collaborative possibilities. Some full scripts contain great detail about what is to be drawn in each panel and are accompanied by thumbnail drawings that show the page layouts. On the other end of the spectrum are those scripts that supply little more than the dialogue to go in word balloons and the narration to go in captions. Such scripts provide only the barest details about what appears or is happening in each panel and might not even specify which panels go together on a page. A writer and artist team should negotiate the type of script they want to use before they begin the project.

If you repeatedly collaborate with the same person or team you will continually modify your approach until you find the one that works best for your mix of talents and personalities. New collaborations, however, can be a bit awkward, but there are some things writers and artists should keep in mind that might make the collaboration work more smoothly.

If you are a writer, describe the details that absolutely must be included, but remember, there is no need to describe every aspect of layout and every element of composition to someone who probably has a stronger sense of visual storytelling than you do. An artist will be more motivated, and likely produce better work, if he or she is given some room to be artistic.

A comics writer must use economy of expression. Comics should be a strongly visual medium. When word balloons and captions obscure most of the artwork in a panel it is not an effective use of the comics form. Let the pictures tell the story whenever possible.

If you are an artist, there will be times when you have a better idea for layout or composition than what was described by the writer. There will other times when the writer might have gotten carried away with verbiage and left insufficient room

for the artwork. In suggesting a change to your collaborator's work you have to be a diplomat. Remember, writers tend to be very fond of their words so you have to be delicate when suggesting that some of those words must be purged.

It is always best for an artist to check with the writer before making substantive changes. It can save you time and aggravation. You might have to redraw a panel if you eliminated something that was essential for the authenticity of the work or that was meant to suggest a particular subtext.

Telling a couple of friends who are creating a comic that they should seek legal advice certainly seems ludicrous. That is until there are bills to be paid or profits to be split. Unless you are expecting to sell the movie rights to your nonfiction comic book you probably do not need to hire a lawyer, but it might not be a bad idea to use an online legal document site to help you put in writing the answers to certain questions: How will expenses be shared? How will profits be shared? Who owns which rights? You are more likely to remain friends if these questions are answered early on, when they do not seem to matter, as opposed to having arguments over money later when debts or profits do matter.

SUGGESTED EXERCISES

- 1) Find the comic book *Three Who Came Back!* (1965) at the UNL Government Comics Collection site. Which type of narrator is telling this story? Make a case for your classification.
- 2) Find the comic book *Time of Decision* (1955) at the UNL Government Comics Collection site and identify the various types of narrators that are used to tell this story. Is there anything you find confusing about the narration?
- 3) Observe a person doing some sort of physical work, then use the DRAW method to describe both person and place in a descriptive paragraph.
- 4) Go to a restaurant, laundromat, Walmart, or other place with many people and eavesdrop on a conversation. Write it down as accurately as you can, then use the dialogue to create a short scene in prose or comics form.