A PICTURE IS WORTH A THOUSAND HURTS: REPRESENTING ILLNESS THROUGH THE FANTASTIC IN COMICS

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ABSTRACT

Within the burgeoning niche of comics’ studies is rising a new discipline that seeks to synthesize the power of comics with the understanding and furthering of medicine. Graphic medicine as a discipline (i.e. the intersection of the comics medium and medical discourse) has recently grown in both production and exploration of realistic medical-based comics; however, there is a noticeable lack of discussion of those graphic works which fall outside the category of memoir or realism. This work aims to bring into the spotlight comics which initially may not seem as productive for the discussion of the medical humanities. Mediating illness and death through the fantastic, David B.’s *L’ascension du Haut Mal* (Epileptic), Paco Roca’s *Arrugas*, Steven Seagle and Teddy Kristiansen’s *It’s a Bird..*, and Grant Morrison, Frank Quitely, and Jamie Grant’s *All Star Superman* add to the broader discussion of comics and medicine in a non-traditional way. Each of these texts will be analyzed in relation to fantastic elements in their plots and images, and their way of understanding and representing illness through fantasy will be explored. This work will introduce the aforementioned overlooked texts into the discourse of graphic medicine in specific, and comics studies in general, hoping to bridge the gap between the marginal and the mainstream in aiding understanding of some of the most unintelligible of human conditions.
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Chapter 1: Introduction

There has been a recent revival in interest for comics and, specifically, their use in the realm of academia. Moreover, the new academic area of graphic medicine has shown that graphic pathographies – that is, tales of illness that are put into comics form – can be used in the medical field as a form of therapy for the ill and their families.¹ This trend thus far has been mostly confined to the biographical works within the medium (Mom’s Cancer, Our Cancer Year, and the like) which deal with the individual experience of the patient and/or their loved ones. This, however, can be highly constricting – while these biographies are both interesting and useful for the purposes mentioned above, there is a large number of texts that are not included in graphic medical analysis that I argue should be.

Despite this move towards an academic discourse of comics and specifically their use in the medical humanities, there has still been resistance towards accepting those that are fictional or even include fictional elements. But one must then ask: what is the benefit of the fictional and the fantastic here? David B. explains that illness “was something that [he] absolutely couldn’t wrap [his] head around… [he] tried to resolve all of this in [his] own way” (Wivel 107). The fantastic acted for him as a buffer or a medium through which he could attempt to grasp his brother’s illness. The other texts cited here work in a similar way – that is mediating that which the real cannot properly convey in an attempt to give order to the disorder – here specifically illness and/or death. These fantastic texts may, on the surface, be pigeonholed into the flippant

nature that many still associate with comics due to their (original) subject matter and publication history. As Steven in *It’s a Bird...* eloquently puts it: “[comics are] actually not funny anymore. People who read comics now want drama and adventure more than laughs” (Seagle and Kristiansen 25.4). Within these ‘new’ comics, we have the opportunity to explore the more fantastical elements of disease and its treatment even though there has been this motion towards focusing almost exclusively on memoirs of illness (i.e. graphic pathographies). However, merely focusing on these ‘real’ graphic pathographies excludes a large portion of texts to be explored in the same way as their ‘serious’ counterparts have already begun to be. I argue that not only should these fictional texts be studied in the same light that biographical graphic novels are, but that they can contribute to the now-forming corpus of interest in graphic pathographies and their academic value. By ignoring those comics that do not fit into the category of biographical pathography, we are missing the understanding and support that such texts may give to those in need of their understanding – albeit fictional – characters and situations.

The benefit to such expansion of source material to include fictional graphic novels allows for less restriction in finding material that can productively be analyzed. From superheroes to Star Wars, humanity inherently must deal with its bodies’ failure – and it is these moments which allow a unique insight into the core of illness and healing. As we will see over the course of this work, there are elements in illness and/or death that are not able to be represented through the real alone. While comics allow the author/artist more freedom of expression than text alone, strict realism similarly poses a different, but equally restrictive, block

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2 As Smith quotes: “the general public has traditionally been profoundly unaware of the potential range of the comics medium, and has continued to see it essentially as entertainment for children”
on conveyance of illness. Examples such as the draconian epilepsy in David B.’s *Epileptic* and the threat of inevitable death in Morrison and Quitely’s *All-Star Superman* serve as fantastical representations of those illnesses and experiences which, again, may not be fully conveyed through realism alone.

Unfortunately, it seems that there has been little research performed in terms of specifically fictional graphic novels with their relationship to medicine. There has been a growing movement called Graphic Medicine, however, which has striven to “explore... the interaction between the medium of comics and the discourse of healthcare” (Graphic Medicine), yet this work has been mostly restricted to the aforementioned biographical graphic pathographies. In addition, there have been pedagogical analyses of the importance of graphic novels in health and medicine including Hatfield's “An Art of Tensions” from *Alternative Comics: An Emerging Literature*, Green and Myers’ “Graphic Medicine: use of comics in medical education and patient care”, and Williams' “Graphic medicine: comics as medical narrative.” I aim to use these breakthrough academic works towards a discussion of that subsection of graphic pathographies which these discussions have given little focus.
Chapter 2: **Fantastic in the Real**

“Chris Hatfield writes: ‘Autobiography has become a distinct, indeed crucial, genre in today's comic books – despite the troublesome fact that comics, with their hybrid, visual-verbal nature, pose an immediate and obvious challenge to the idea of “nonfiction”’ (112). It appears that the comic as a medium provokes an examination of the self.” (Berninger, et al. 45).

**Epileptic by David B.**

David B.’s *L’ascension du Haut Mal* (French for “The Ascension of the High Evil” and published in English under the title *Epileptic*) is a series of comics documenting the progression of a boy’s struggle with Epilepsy from the viewpoint of his brother. Published over the course of almost a decade in series, this comic does not focus merely on Jean-Christophe’s illness but also on his family’s attempt to live the day-to-day while caring for him. More important than the specific characters and experiences, however, is the work’s relateable nature. As B. himself states: “my case isn’t unique. I’m fully aware of that – in fact, what I want to show is that beyond all the specifics that I’m showing, my case is absolutely not unique” (Wivel 108). Rather than simply narrate the actions and reactions of his past, B. “wanted to chronicle the construction of [his] imagination” and present the reader the emotion of his life, rather than just its history (Wivel 108). I aim to analyze sections of B.’s novel in order to see *how* he uses the fantastic to attempt to mediate this illness which no one in the family can truly understand. Because “the reality had to be elsewhere,” fantasy is the only way the young Pierre-François and the more mature David B. are able to cope with the debilitation which epilepsy brings to this family.
Immediately upon opening the novel, the reader is shocked with the image of the titular epileptic Jean-Christophe – an ogre-like scarred and bloated face without any accompanying description or narration. David B. includes textual description of his brother, as one might find in a novel, but only five panels after we have already seen his worn features (B. 2.7-9). Despite Jean-Christophe’s arguably monstrous appearance, this is not part of the visions and imaginative thought bubbles that we see from Pierre-François throughout this novel. This fairytale villain is, we should suppose, an accurate representation of the narrator/author’s damaged older brother who is unrecognizable both to Pierre-François (cf. 2.5-6) and to the real world. This is more striking in contrast to the more realistic representation of the older Pierre-François and the room they are in. That particular art style and the scene’s localization leave no doubt that this is reality and not some imagined world – however, Jean-Christophe looks no less monstrous in the linoleum-lined bathroom. Through this representational form, B. is able to focus the reader on Jean-Christophe from the very first page. More specifically, the focus here is on the reality of Jean-Christophe’s illness and forces that realization into the reader’s mind as a contrast to the fantastic nature of the novel.
1934. Je suis dans la salle de bain, chez mes parents à Olivier.

L’espace d’un instant, je n’ai pas reconnu le type qui vient d’entrer. C’est mon frère.

Veux pas . . . f’embêter.

C’est la première fois que je le vois comme ça, sans les artifices du soir.

Je ne savais pas que tu n’as plus de dents devant.

Je n’ai un appareil . . .

Ia des cicatrices sur tout le corps, ses sourcils sont coupés par des couteaux.

Il n’a plus de cheveux, sur l’arête du crâne, à force d’être tombé.

Il est mince à cause des médicaments et du manque d’exercice.

Laver les dents . . .

Vas-y ! J’ai fini.

Bon, eh bien bonne nuit . . .
The next few pages give the reader a glimpse into the imaginative childhood of Pierre-François and his siblings as they play games of ‘pretend’ (cf. 3.4) and stories (specifically violent ones for him) fascinate the children. The first juxtaposition we are given between illness and fantasy – which we will see much throughout the novel vis-a-vis Jean-Christophe’s disease – is interestingly not at all connected to the epileptic brother but rather to Pierre-François who sees his sleepwalking spells as the experience of being carried away by whirlwinds. On 5.6, Jean-Christophe seems to want to be part of this fantasy and, when Pierre-François recounts these ‘spells’ to his sibling, he replies “moi aussi!”3 (B. Fr 4.6). His wish fulfilled, we witness Jean-Christophe’s first epileptic episode, which is not narrated at all in words or captions. The ‘fit’ is marked by an ellipsis speech bubble coming from Jean-Christophe, followed by a question mark speech bubble by Pierre-François (B. 8.6) – there are no words from either of them because Jean-Christophe is physically unable to talk while his brother is mentally unable to understand or speak of the experience. More marked is the unnatural expression made by Jean-Christophe: arms curled inwards, mouth agape, and eyes rolled upward towards the back of his head (B. Fr 8.6). Over the course of the next five panels, we see different shots of the episode, including Pierre-François’ question to his brother: “Hé Tito, tu fiat le mort?”4 (B. Fr. 9.1). These images approximate an epileptic ‘fit’, but Pierre-François does not seem to register his mother’s explanation that Jean-Christophe “il y a eu un malaise…”5 (B. Fr. 9.6). Rather he is sure that he

3 All translations from the original French are mine, and were aided by the published English edition.

“Me too!”

4“Hey Tito, are you playing dead?”

5 “There has been [i.e. he has had] an attack”
knows what really happened to his brother, “Il a été enlevé par typhon, c’est sûr!”⁶ (B. *Fr. 9.7*) and is also sure that, now that these typhoons are active in the day, he (i.e. Pierre-François) must be more careful or they will come for him as well. Again, these may seem to be simply imaginative inventions on part of Pierre-François; however they also lend a faraway and otherworldly quality to these very real and – as we shall see – very debilitating attacks. Moreover, the representations that Pierre-François gives to the disease act as a medium between him and it. That is, a young child cannot hope to comprehend what is occurring – these violent attacks that come to his brother randomly and without warning – and must deal with it in a way he can understand. Traditional medical discourse cannot properly explain to Pierre-François (in a way he can ingest) what this is and that he is safe from contagion, and he therefore left to mediate it through these fantasies.

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⁶ “He was taken away by a typhoon for sure!”
Figure 2: L'ascension du Haut Mal, 8

Tout à coup, il est là ! Gigantesque ! C'est lui !

Je viens vous présenter mes excuses pour ce qui s'est passé hier.

Il disparaît aussitôt. Mon père m'a attirée dans un piège et mes parents vont entrer le monstre dans la maison.

Ça c'est quoi tout !

Un peu plus tard, des ouvriers viennent détruire l'entrepôt. Jean-Christophe est arrêté et moi, je m'en fous.


Vrmm Vrmmm mm...

Laisse-moi monter aussi !
He Tito, tu vois le mort?

Il est lourd, j'ai l'impression de le soutenir pendant une éternité.

Hinm... Hinmnnnnn

En fait, je savais ce qui s'était passé.

Il a été enterré par un typhon, c'est sûr!

Mais c'est bizarre, je pensais pas qu'il y avait des typhons le jour!

Qu'est-ce qui a Tito?

Il a eu un malaise.

Il va falloir faire très attention!
We see a subsequent transformation in Pierre-François and his relationship with that which is real and that which is fantastic in his life. He tells of a dream in which the Egyptian death god Anubis comes to him, but he ultimately realizes that it is merely a shadow of the closet (17.1-6). Pivotally, he stresses that he “[a] peux avoir peur des gens, de la vie, de l’avenir… mais [il] n’[a] pas puer de fantômes, des diables, de sorcières, de vampires…”7 (B. Fr 16.7-8). Rather, Pierre-François begins to use these fantasies as an escape mechanism for his own anger and vicariously for his brother’s disease. Pierre-François sees himself as having “assez de fureur en [il] pour cent mille guerriers”8 (B. Fr 19.1) – a rage that is self-related to his brother’s seizures.

In this same one-panel fantasy we see Jean-Christophe seizing while being carried away by a Mongol horse. As Pierre-François writes and illustrates books, he covers “feuilles entières de batailles gigantesques… épilepsie à [son]”9 (B. Fr 19.5). This particular passage not only gives us a precursor to this book’s author/artist but also some insight into this very confused boy’s mind. Pierre-François is not able to digest all that is happening around him, and he thus expands into his own fantasy world which combines the mythos of his father’s various stories of war with his own anger and uncertainty. The reader can now understand that Jean-Christophe’s illness does not only impact him, but also those in his immediate surroundings. Pierre-François is vicariously afflicted by his brother’s condition and is only able to mediate it through this fantasy – an illusory world where he is able to vent his anger, frustration, and insecurity.

7 “may have fear of people, life, the future… but he will not have fear of phantoms, devils, sorcerers, vampires”

8 “enough fury in [him] for one hundred thousand warriors”

9 “entire pages with enormous battles… his own epilepsy”
We are told that a similar anger resides in Jean-Christophe but this rage is expressed via neo-Nazi sentiment – a fantasy of grandeur and power that can only be a reaction complex to the frailty of his epilepsy. Unlike his brother’s mediation, Jean-Christophe is condensing rather than expanding his world; power, glory, and order are opposite to the wild chaos of Pierre-François’ Mongol hordes. While we are only given B.’s representation of Jean-Christophe’s fantasies, we can see that there is clear discord between the two fantasies that are used to deal with the same illness. The Nazi fanaticism appears, rather than some latent anti-Semitism or dreams of world conquest, as the ultimate ordering Jean-Christophe can find to consolidate the chaos wrought by his disease. Fantasy, then, becomes an escape mechanism for these two boys that are thrust into the unknown reality that is illness – either individually or vicariously. The child cannot express this through reality and logic, and even the adult B. must recount these emotions through the fantastical elements in which his childhood brain processed them.

Even the death of Pierre-François’ grandfather is mediated through his imagination and fantastical distancing of the hard truth. After noting his grandfather’s mouth being strangely open after he passes away, Pierre-François comments on the wires used to shut the man’s mouth (B. Fr 24.2). Pierre-François’ thought bubble on 24.4 mentions that this corpse no longer looks like the grandfather he had seen moments earlier, rather – as the narrative voice continues – “On dirait une espèce d’oiseau”10 (B. Fr 24.5). Here we are introduced to the odd long-beaked bird that will ultimately follow Pierre-François for the rest of the novel as an external conscience. These three faces (grandfather with open mouth, grandfather with closed mouth, and the long-
beaked bird) are said to be “ces trois visages me poursuivent toujours”\textsuperscript{11} (B. Fr 24.9) – and as was mentioned in the previous sentence, the bird face will haunt the reader as well for the rest of the novel. Visually, the three large heads look forward from behind an older Pierre-François who walks through the real world represented as a quaint village, leading the reader forward towards the next page and the rest of the book. This mirrors the narrative text above and foreshadows that these “fantastical characters” will become Pierre-François’ “imaginary friends[,] ghosts and demons [rather than friendly characters] because that was [his] frame of reference” (Wivel 108). As such, fantastic mediation in this way does not end after Pierre-François’ childhood, but rather continues in parallel to his brother’s progressing illness. These figures, along with others picked up throughout the novel, travel with Pierre-François and show “all the pain, all the emotion, the whole symbolic aspect of it, in the drawings” rather than merely through textual description (Wivel 108). Comics then, are a specific way to mediate the insecurity associated not only with Jean-Christophe’s illness, but also with other hurdles throughout Pierre-François’ life.

\textsuperscript{11} “These three faces haunt me always”
Figure 4: L’ascension du Haut Mal, 24

Il est bizarre maintenant, il a la bouche fermée, les joues pincées.

M’as pourquoi il a la bouche comme ça, papa?

On lui a mis une pince dans la bouche pour que sa mâchoire se tienne fermée.

ha...

C’est idiot, ce n’est plus pépé...

On dirait une espèce d’oiseau.

C’est bête, les adultes.

Mon grand-père meurt et on va enterrer un drôle d’oiseau.

Ces deux visages me poursuivent toujours.
Five of the six panels of the next page are dedicated completely to a terrible epileptic episode, in which Pierre-François’ bird is now paralleled with a ‘spirit animal’ for Jean-Christophe. As Jean-Christophe exits the car, B. narrates that “il est frappé par une nouvelle crise d’épilepsie… une crise terrible… une crise qui ne s’arrête plus et qui le tord dans tous le sens… comme s’il allait exploser”12 (B. Fr 25.2-6). Each of the short bursting phrases is accompanied by an attack by a serpentine or draconic monster that slowly attacks Jean-Christophe (Figure 4). As he steps out of the car this dragon sneaks up behind him, both looking forward towards the outer page with the same expression – neither of them with malice, only something akin to anticipation (25.2). Once B. relates to the reader that Jean-Christophe “est frappé par une nouvelle crise d’épilepsie”13, the dragon has now gone through Jean-Christophe’s chest and bitten him across the head. Metaphorically, this can be taken as the sudden strike of the seizure, which takes him completely by surprise (we again see the surprised look on his face that is characteristic throughout the novel) and while targeting the head invades his entire body. The third panel of the attack depicts even deeper subjugation by the seizure/dragon which mounts Jean-Christophe as he has fallen, twisted, glasses half-off, almost as unnatural as the dragon that attacks him – either of the two could be marked by the narrator’s comment that is “terrible”14 (B. 25.4). We must again note that were are not given Jean-Christophe’s experience of these attacks, but rather only one interceded by the narrative voice. This dragon and his movements are merely

12 “He was struck by a new epileptic attack… a terrible attack… an attack that does not stop and that pulls his body in all directions… like he was going to explode”

13 See Note 12 “was struck…”

14 “terrible”
representations that Pierre-François impresses on his brother’s illness, something that neither he nor we can truly understand by virtue of us not being Jean-Christophe. By this fourth panel (25.5) of the attack, the dragon has become larger than Jean-Christophe, becoming more and more visible as the panels progress. The two figures twist into knots – the dragon has grabbed Jean-Christophe with all four of its limbs and once again has his head in its jaws. Jean-Christophe’s hands are clawed, almost identical to the dragon, and his body is contorted and looking at the reader with blank expression. Perhaps this characteristic of his attacks prompt Pierre-François to imagine them like this. Pierre-François’ preoccupation with “ghosts and demons” help shape his view of the attack as a form of possession by a malevolent spirit which then becomes one with Jean-Christophe and shape him that way – the dragon and the brother as one. This panel and the one directly before it have the dragon facing back towards the center of the book, almost holding Jean-Christophe back – preventing him from moving forward as the plot progresses and the page turns.

The page’s final panel jolts us back into the real world and away from the fantastical space where Jean-Christophe futilely wrestles with his inner monster that he has no control over. We are returned to the mundane, where loving but visibly exhausted family must help their ill brother and son by carrying him up the stairs and sending for a doctor. This lurch back to the imaginative world serves as an empathetic reminder that while Jean-Christophe must wrestle with the dragon within him, there are others that are adversely affected as well by his disorder.

As David B. later stated in an interview

I’m no physician, but when I was a little boy and my brother would have a seizure, I would ask myself lots of questions about that. It was something I didn’t
understand, something evil in my family and I would frame it in my own mind in terms of good and evil, of suffering, of pain… of joy and then sudden eruptions of an illness that wiped out all the pace of mind we might have been enjoying. It was really the eruption of evil…” (Wivel 106).

For him as well as for his brother there is no real understanding of this disease. Not only does this dragon of evil attack his brother, but it also burns down the village that is their normal and peaceful existence. According to Chaney, “personified as a mythological beast, epilepsy subsumes both physical illness and psychic agon” (i.e. the mental wellbeing of the family) as they struggle through understanding what has thrown their life so off-kilter. B. then shares this non-understanding with his reader through his fantasies, “inducing seizure through surreal details that haunt characters and reader-viewers alike” (Chaney). The children’s fantasy parallels the parents’ belief in gurus and strange diets, it is the only way in which they can attempt to give order to the chaos and mediate that which they cannot fully understand.
Figure 5: L'ascension du Haut Mal, 25

Le soir, mon père nous ramène à Olivet. Ma mère est restée avec notre grand-mère.

On arrive à la maison. Jean-Christophe sort de la voiture.

Et aussitôt, il est frappé par une nouvelle crise d'épilepsie.

Une crise terrible.

Une crise qui ne s'arrête plus et qui le tord dans tous les sens.

Comme s'il allait exploser.

On va le coucher. Je vais appeler le médecin!
The first panel on the following page (Figure 5) melds the real and the fantastic portions of Jean-Christophe’s illness: he is in his hospital pajamas and resting his head on the pillow, but this is where the ‘reality’ stops. Jean-Christophe’s body is twisted, claw-like hands covering his face as the serpent constitutes most of the page while biting the sick boy’s back and gripping his foot. We again see the long-billed bird representative of the boys’ grandfather and the lab coat donning cat (presumably the doctor) looking on with non-expressive glances. It should be noted that Pierre-François is the only one in the panel to be looking towards the right and is the only one with emotion on his face – the raised eyebrows and wide eyes of a boy who cannot fathom what is happening to his sick brother, even with the internal analogy of the epilepsy serpent.

Squier notes of this particular scene that

> We see the impending seizure represented as the large-beaked bird sitting beside Jean-Christophe on the back seat of the realistically-portrayed family car. Then, as the seizure hits, in the next several frames, Jean-Christophe's ordinary world is shown darkening to nothingness while his head is gripped by the sharp-toothed jaws of a huge mythic lizard. Here the choice of iconic image—the lizard with its stylized black-and-white coils—increases the resonance of the frame... (Squier 134)

Whether the bird should be, in fact, associated with the imminent seizure rather than merely one of Pierre-François’ archetypical projections, Squier’s point about the transition between the real and the fantastic – namely “darkening to nothingness” – is vital. Continuing to change focus
between the inner and individual torment of the seizure and the reactions of those who must vicariously be hurt by it allows a dual mediation of this disease through the fantastic.
Figure 6: L’ascension du Haut Mal, 26

Le médecin l’envoie à l’hôpital. La crise dure toute la nuit et toute la journée du lendemain.

Ce jour-là, mon frère apprend l’ascension du Haut Mal.

De la fenêtre de ma chambre, je vois les arbres noirs et les lumières d’Orléans.
Est-ce que je dois aller me coucher au fond du jardin ?
Arrugas by Paco Roca

Crossing the Pyrenees from France into Spain, fantasy can also be seen in the Iberian Peninsula as a creative means of mediating illness. The fantastic situated within the real is often associated with juvenility or mental instability and in Arrugas, Alzheimers renders a protagonist deteriorating rapidly, surrounded by geriatrics who likewise fall into senility. Mediation of this digressive aging occur through the crossover between the real and fantastic though, unlike B.’s work, Roca contrasts the two worlds within the same space to achieve this affect rather than directly overlaying them (like we saw with the dragon of epilepsy attacking Jean-Christophe). One can see that while these two methods are different temporally, they both work to mediate illness that cannot be otherwise explained. Representing the fleeting lucidity and function of a person is difficult to do in word or image alone – it is the juxtaposition between the two that allows comics to be so powerful in exploring illness through such elements.

In one of the opening pages of the novel, we first see Roca juxtapose fantasy and reality to immerse the reader in a dementia most have no experience with. After asking a rude customer couple to calm themselves and refrain from profanity, Emilio is told “no estás en el banco. Hace ya muchos años que no trabas en el banco… lo único que quiero es que te comas de una vez la cena”15 (Roca 8.1-2). The surprised Emilio looks agape downward, leading the reader to the next panel in which the forty-year-old looking man is suddenly gray-haired and eating dinner in bed. The young Emilio faces against the reading direction and down in panel 3, and stares directly towards panel 5 where he echoes the same look with respect to this reality he has

15 All translations from the original Spanish are my own: “You are not in the bank. It has been many years that you haven’t worked in the bank… The only thing I want is that you eat your dinner for once”
just been thrust back into. The ‘bank customer,’ whom we now know to be his son, continues, complaining to the woman (ostensibly his wife) by his side: “cada vez está peor de la cabeza” to which she replies “¿qué te cuesta seguirle la corriente a tu padre?”16 (Roca 8.5-6). This response by his daughter-in-law is accompanied by a change in Emilio’s expression, from one of shock to one of sadness (Roca 8.6). As his son exclaims (as if his father is not right in front of him and lucid) “no lo aguanto más acabará volviéndome loco”17 Emilio flips the bowl of soup into his son’s face, letting the two know that “ya os podéis ir”18 (Roca 8.7-8). The direct visual and spatial parallel between panels 2-3 and panels 5-6 jolt the reader jarringly from the fantasy world of Emilio’s past and the present. While the son’s frustration may be understandable in some ways, the reader is complicit to Emilio’s innocence – we are also in the world of his youth without knowing that this was merely dinner and not a rude bank customer. Already at this early stage of the novel, the reader is given special access to the mental and emotional conflict that is a result of living in two parallel worlds that others do not inhabit.

16 “Every time he is worse in the head” … “what does it matter to you to go with the flow with your father?”

17 “I can’t bear it anymore I will end up going crazy”

18 “You two can go already”
Figure 7: Arrugas, 8

NO ESTÁS EN EL BANCO. HACE YA MUCHOS AÑOS QUE NO TRABAJAS EN EL BANCO.

LO ÚNICO QUE QUIERO ES QUE TE COMAS UNA VEZ LA CENA.

YA SE NOS HA HECHO TARDE OTRA VEZ.

CAPA VEZ ESTÁ PEOR DE LA CABEZA.

PERO, JUAN... ¿QUE TE CUESTA SEGUIRLE LA CORRIENTE A TU PADRE?

NO LO AGUANTO MÁS ACABARÁ VOLVÉNDOME LOCO.

YA OS PODÉIS IR.
It is not only Emilio’s dementia that is mediated through the image in this novel. As Miguel (Emilio’s new roommate) gives a tour of the facility, Emilio and the reader are introduced to Señora Rosario – a woman who believes she is still in her youth and traveling the Orient Express. As with the mimetic shift between young and old seen with Emilio, we see the same change in character while her illness is being described. As the beautiful young woman looks out of the window, Miguel explains that “la Señora Rosario se pasa el día mirando por la ventana”\(^{19}\) (Roca 19.2). The next panel shows the Señora sitting in the same exact posture, but aged half a century, back in the present of the assisted living center. Miguel completes his sentence explaining that Señora Rosario does not really know where she is, rather “cree que viaja en el Orient Express camino de Estambul”\(^{20}\) (Roca 19.3).

\(^{19}\) “Mrs. Rosario passes the day by looking out the window

\(^{20}\) “She believes herself riding on the Orient Express on its way to Istanbul”
NO, SEÑORA ROSARIO
NO SÓLO NOS BAJAMOS AHÍ.

LA SEÑORA ROSARIO SE PASA EL DÍA MIRANDO POR LA VENTANA.

CREE QUE VIAJA EN EL ORIENT EXPRESS CAMINO DE ESTAMBUL.

SEÑORA ROSARIO, SOY EL REVISOR.

ESPERAME UN MOMENTO.

VAMOS, TE ENSEÑARÉ LA BIBLIOTECA.

¿ES TAMBIÉN UNA SALA LLENA DE ANCIANOS DURMENOS?

¿QUIÉN TE HA ENSEÑADO?

SÍ, ES VERDAD, NO VALE LA PENILLA.

¿Y ESA ESCALER A DÓNDE VA?

ME LA IMAGINO.
As was briefly mentioned above, being thrust between the contemporary reality and a fantastic past cannot be easily accomplished in text alone. There is a need for image – and more specifically juxtaposed image – to connect the two desperate realities and represent the fleeting minds of the demented. An example of this can be seen during Emilio’s first group therapy activity. The geriatrics have passed a large red ball around in a circle once, and they are now told by the therapist to pass in the other way. As Señorita Ana (the aforementioned therapist) hands the ball to Emilio, she tells instructs him: “toma la talope y pásala”21 (Roca 30.5). Sharing the reader’s confusion at what a talope is, Emilio gapes at the bright red ball and asks “¿el qué?”22 (Roca 30.6). Ana repeats that he must pass the talope, as do Miguel and the deaf Agustín. The confused look is again focused in on as Emilio struggles to name the object in his hands (“Ah, la… la…”23), mirroring the same confused expression we saw in the novel’s first scene. As a hybrid text and image medium, placement of comics’ panels as well as their other physical characteristics are often highly significant in creating meaning. Positioning a large and full-width panel as the last one of a page gives it a prominence and resonance that warrants close attention. In this page’s final panel Roca shifts the reader’s vantage point to match Emilio’s, as we stare down at the ball in our hands and ask “¿Có-cómo se llama…?”24 (Roca 31.3-4). The reader and the senile Emilio now see as one and thus we end the episode in his position – something that could not be accomplished with text alone. The reader is introduced to an entirely new level of empathy, one where we are not merely distinguished observers that are privy to two worlds, but

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21 “take the ball and pass it” – talope is a garbled version of pelota (Spanish for ‘ball’)
22 “The what?”
23 “Ah, the… the…”
24 “Wh-what is it called…?”
also visually placed within the world of the demented. We are able to see the ball in our hands, but as much as we want to say *pelota*, the word does not come to mind.
Figure 9: Arrugas, 30

EL MÉRITO ES SUYO, SEÑORITA ANA.

Cómo odio a este hombre.

Ahora vamos a hacerlo al revés. Tenéis que pasarla a vuestro compañero de la izquierda.

Empezarémos por Emilio.

Toma la talope y pásala.

¿El qué?

La talope, pásala, rápido.
EMILIO, LA TALOPE.

LA TALOPE.

LA TALOPE.

AH, LA... LA...

¿CO-CÓMO SE LLAMA...?
A short sequence of panels expands upon the reality-fantasy juxtaposition we have seen with both Emilio and Señora Rosario. As Emilio and Miguel leave the therapy room, we are jarred into a panel of a young soldier in what seems to be the old Spanish Morocco regiments sitting and smoking a cigarette (Figure 10). In the following two panels, Emilio and Miguel walk across the page in the same military uniform (though in their elderly visage) and, as the young man stands and salutes, Miguel tells him “puedes sentarte, Félix”\(^25\) (Roca 33.3). Instead of juxtaposition of the same pose and people, young in their demented fantasy and old in reality, here there is continuity of motion across the two worlds. There is no longer a fixed boundary between the fiction and the real – there is free motion that denies even the reader registration of time and place. Félix’s difficulty distinguishing his elderly institution-mates as not soldiers in Morocco mirrors the difficulty we saw Emilio have earlier, but foreshadows the greater difficulty he will soon have separating the real from the imagined. Miguel and Emilio walk further across the panel while Felix (now old again) sits down, while Miguel comments “a saber qué tiene Félix en la cabeza”\(^26\) (Roca 33.4). The joke is that the reader now has insight into what is in Felix’s head, melding the two worlds of fantasy and reality for the reader only, since none of the characters here can simultaneously see both.

\(^25\) “You can sit down, Felix”

\(^26\) “If only we could know what Felix has going on in his head”
Figure 11: Arrugas, 33

Puedes sentarte, Félix.

A saber qué tiene Félix en la cabeza.

Vaya al comedor y pregunte allí por el teléfono.

Espere, espere, señora Sol.
The final page of the novel completes this mediation between fantasy and reality with realizations of the (lucid) characters themselves of this technique. After Emilio has been taken to the upstairs full-care wing due to his deteriorated mental condition, the comic returns to the main room of the institution. Antonia (who has been Emilio and Miguel’s close friend throughout the novel) shuffles towards the aforementioned Señora Rosario’s window seat. As Antonia approaches, Señoria Rosario is again shown as her younger chic self, sitting on the Orient Express. We know from the plot of the novel that Antonia is not senile, but merely elderly, so there is no reason to think that she too will share the same senile hallucination as Señora Rosario. However, as Antonia asks ‘off-screen’ if “está ocupando este asiento?”27 and Señora Rosario questions if Antonia also is traveling to Istanbul, we are again in the fantastic realm of an early 20th century train ride (Roca 97.3). Moreover, when Antonia sits down in the next panel, she too is young, elegantly dressed, and answers that “sí”28 she too is going to Istanbul (Roca 97.4). The novel concludes with a ‘zoom out’ shot of the train riding through the mountains as one of the passengers comments that “los Cárpatos son tan bonitos en primavera”29 (Roca 97.6). As the train’s bellowing steam engulfs half of the last panel, leaving only white space with no border on the right side of it, we are left to ponder the nature of this encounter. One way to view this scene is as yet another decline into dementia, this time by Antonia who is the one commenting of the beauty she sees in the Carpathian Mountains. However, I would push beyond this reading. We

27 “Is this seat taken?”

28 “Yes”

29 The Carpathians [Mountains] are beautiful in spring”
have seen from the progression of the novel that Antonia shows no sign of dementia or mental instability, and thus have no reason to suspect it now. Rather, it seems, this is an acceptance on Antonia’s part of the importance of these fantasies in mediating the mental illnesses of this novel. By ‘playing along’ with Señora Rosario, it does not matter who is the one commenting of the mountains’ beauty. Rather, the synthesis of the real and the surreal allow the two women to interact, even though they inhabit two different mental states and thus two different worlds.
Figure 12: Arrugas, 97
Arrugas is supremely elegant in melding the world of the fantastic and the real through their contrast. Traveling in time between a senile recollection of the past and the present intimately reproduces something that medicine cannot afford us – insight into the mind of the demented. While the reader can distinguish between real and fantastic, there is nothing one can do to change how and when the characters flow in and out of the two worlds – we are passive observers to an active illness. As Emilio’s mental state deteriorates throughout the novel the reader is forced to accompany him visually, seeing from both within and without the true terror of indistinguishability between reality and fantasy.
Chapter 3: **Look! At the scan! It’s a Tumor. It’s a Myocardial Infarction. No, it’s… Super Sick!**

*It’s a Bird… by Steven Seagle*

Despite a title that would lead one to think otherwise, *It’s a Bird...* is neither a Superman comic in particular nor a superhero comic in general. Rather, it is a pseudo-memoir that explores the reality of illness with Superman as a fantastic mediator. The graphic novel is composed of various vignettes that follow the main story arc of the main character Steven interspersed with short digressive episodes – both tracks dealing with various aspect of Superman that are, under the surface, less than heroic.

The novel opens with a contemplation of “the big red S”30 – which thrusts us in to the intimate world of intertwined Superman and Huntington’s (Seagle and Kristiansen 1.1). The scene begins in medias res with two young boys sitting impatiently in a hospital waiting room, reading the medical report on which the aforementioned ‘S’ is written: “out of place… like it was added later… an afterthought” (Seagle and Kristiansen 2.2-4).

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30 All emphasis in quotes from *It’s a Bird...* is unaltered from the original
Figure 13: It's a Bird..., 2

IT DIDN'T LOOK LIKE THE REST OF THE LETTERS ON THE REPORT.

IT LOOKED OUT OF PLACE...

LIKE IT WAS ADDED LATER...

AN AFTERTHOUGHT...

I WAS WITH MY MOM AND DAD AND MY BROTHER, DAVID, IN A HOSPITAL IN NORTH CAROLINA--

--OR COLORADO--

--OR CALIFORNIA--
A few pages later, their father presents the restless boys with a Superman comic to calm them down. This ‘S’ travels throughout the novel as a recurrent connection between both Superman’s iconic shield and as the now introduced Huntington’s disease – an association which remains indelibly intertwined in Steven’s mind: “maybe the big red s wasn’t even on the report… maybe [he’s] confusing things” (Seagle and Kristiansen 6.1-2). The importance of symbolism that is presented in this early stage of the book is one that follows throughout the course of the novel. Superman and the haunting fear of Huntington’s disease are two focal points that allow Steven to mediate his fears and anxieties, offering a way to supersede them in order to find closure.

Like Pierre-François in Epileptic, Steven the narrator escapes reality through immersion in the fantastic. We are presented with the language of a boy who “consumed stories… put [himself] in them… lived them out as [he] devoured them,” a form of escapism that he clings to up to and including during this novel’s plot (Seagle and Kristiansen 8.1). An older Steven admits that this juxtaposition between the Superman comic from his father and the hospital caused him to dislike comics in general, reminding him “of the smell of rubbing alcohol and sick people with veins showing through their legs” (Seagle and Kristiansen 7.1). These first few pages of the graphic novel introduce the scaffolding with which Seagle constructs the novels’ sequencing, as moments of Steven’s life are interspersed with short episodes that loosely concern Superman which tie in to the main problems at that point in the story.

Via the text, we can see that Superman as a character holds a special representation for Steven: that of non-representation. “There’s no access point” to Superman “for anyone if they ever really thought about him,” claims Steven after declining an offer to write a run of the hero’s
comics. Yet, in opposition to this affirmation, we can see that the entirety of this graphic novel functions as a prolonged Superman analogy (Seagle and Kristiansen 13.1-2).

One of the first explorations of symbolism vis-à-vis Superman comes with his characterization as ‘other’. After admitting to his girlfriend that he does not want to write Superman because he is unable to relate to him, she mentions that she cannot see why this is so, “he’s an outsider, just like [Steven]” (Seagle and Kristiansen 20). This connection flows into one of the above mentioned episodes of musing that is separate from the novel’s main plot. Titled ‘The Outsider,’ this vignette contrasts those who are outsiders by choice and those who are forced outside. The authors change the style of the drawing, opting for more simple and less detailed representations. McCloud argues that simplification in comics functions as a form of amplification – meaning that more universality can be injected into an image rather than it being rendered specific to one person who the reader is not (McCloud 30). Clark Kent is able to shed his hat and glasses to become the outsider Superman, but the Jewish accountant, the African-American janitor, and the wheelchair ridden and lesbian employees are not as lucky. All of these outsiders search “for suit and Tie/Hat and Glasses/That will bring/ them from the/ Outside/In,” although they are not as lucky as Superman/Clark Kent is such respects (Seagle and Kristiansen 22). These characters represent the everyday things no one can escape – race, sexuality, religion, and medical problems – and as such are drawn as abstractions just recognizable enough to be placed into their respective otherness. Steven sees himself as one who cannot escape the trauma that comes with his genetic heritage, and he must therefore be jealous of Superman’s inability to turn his otherness off.
Leather gloves
Denim fatigues
If DeRon Sanford
didn’t come to
work
Everyone on The
Planet would
Notice
But when he Does
come in
He doesn’t Blend in
So much as
Vanish in
Push and Sweep
Plain Sight
The Invisible Man.

Until the Coffee
Club Money
Goes Missing from
Someone’s Desk
No one looks at Clark
or even Linda
They don’t say a Word
But don’t really
have to
And on his
Lunch Break
There’s no way
DeRon can
Push and Sweep
away the Skin
That makes him live
Outside Himself.

And Greg Giddley
Whose legs are
Aluminum Spokes
And Melissa
Bandeau
Whose “Boyfriend”
isn’t a Boy at all
Join the Staff that
Searches each
day
For Suit and Tie
Hat and Glasses
That will bring
them from the
Outside
In.
One of the most direct references to this phenomenon of mediating difficult reality though the fantastic appears as Steven waits for what can be assumed to be his annual medical checkup. Starkly transitioning between the previous meta-storyline vignette about the interoperability of identity and change, Steven muses about his own past and writes the last line of the previous side story. The juxtaposition of writing ‘The Outsider’ and nervously waiting at the doctor’s office is unique to this specific vignette. As such, we must note that there is a connection being made between using fantasy to think about illness and ways of escaping it. That is, Steven is using fantasy in specific to comment on the phoniness of Superman’s otherness and in general to mediate the inescapability of his own medical otherness. At the same time, he expresses his dislike for “doctor’s offices” and “hospital waiting rooms” which for him are solely “for… waiting for word that someone died” (Seagle and Kristiansen 23.2,4-6). It at this point that we are first introduced to the harsh reality of Huntington’s Disease, “a nasty little disease that eats away at the nervous system until there’s no controlling it” (Seagle and Kristiansen 24.1).

This page is split into seven panels: six which conform to the ‘standard’ 3x3 grid which are most common in comics on the top and bottom and a full-length panel in the center. The eye moves towards the central panel, which depicts a grotesque, almost zombie-looking humanoid form. With skin greenish-gray and taut, a gaunt face staring blankly up at the ceiling, and hands curled in unnaturally, one might describe this creature as monstrous. As one disengages from this central panel and moves towards the top left for a correct reading order, the identity of this figure becomes clear: it is a woman suffering from Huntington’s Disease – Steven’s grandmother who died of the disease in the opening pages of the book. Steven confides in the reader that his earlier
comics work involved creating mutant superheroes, who were granted “exciting new powers” by their “secret genetic structures” (Seagle and Kristiansen 24.2). Many of the superheroes found in comic books are given their superhuman powers through some form of biological change – be it radioactivity, genetic change, biochemical accident, or the like. The irony is that biological mutations of the sort that grant heroes their powers in reality cause the opposite effect, degeneration of the body to the point of illness or death. Instead of the ability to fly or lift heavy objects as a Superman, biology renders humans Undermen who are crippled and dysfunctional. In the same vein, the bright colors and muscular bodies of these heroes found in the second panel is starkly contrasted with the aforementioned figure in the fourth panel. The ‘creature’ is far bigger than any of the superheroes and overshadows them in the reader’s attention. Realization that “some genes don’t give powers… they take powers away” leads Steven to stop drawing these types of mutant comics. In reality, rather than flight, super-strength, or teleportation, certain genes take away “the power to walk… sit up… eat… [and] speak” (Seagle and Kristiansen 24.4).

While complaining that there is not enough public knowledge about the disease, Steven claims that there is not much known because “Huntington’s Chorea isn’t a glamour disease” and no one famous has died from it, “just people like [his] grandmother” (Seagle and Kristiansen 24.6-7). It with this later assertion that we are greeted with a close-up panel of the dying (or dead) grandmother’s face, which matches the above mentioned undead figure. The words ‘people’ and ‘grandmother’ seem dissonant against the presented image, as if we are supposed to subconsciously feel that this creature is not human. Even the paneling leaves both images of her (panels 3 and 7) borderless and visually distinct from all others on the page. Thus,
we are invited to concur with Steven’s argument, that both the disease and its victims are foreign and non-glamorous. The inescapable reality therefore results in negative rather than positive change, and cannot be mediated by superhero perfection according to Steven – a position contrary to the fact that this is exactly what he is doing here. There is a kind of venting anger that comes out in the passage, which explains to the reader why Steven is so anti-Superman.
Figure 15: *It's a Bird...*, 24

For a few years, I wrote some 'mutant' comics—trying to think of exciting new powers the heroes' secret genetic structures might give them.

...a nasty little disease that eats away at the nervous system until there's no controlling it.

I quit when I realized that some genes don't give powers...they take powers away.

The power to walk.

The power to sit up.

The power to eat.

The power to speak.

My parents never spoke much about what had killed my grandmother.

They just said what they knew:

Unfortunately, what they knew wasn't much because Huntington's chorea isn't a glamour disease.

Not enough casualties; no celebrities have died from it.

Just people like my grandmother.

...that it damages nerves and runs in families.
As Steven slowly carries the reader along to explore the reasons for his Superman ambivalence, we are given a glimpse into his childhood which conveys his realization of the secrecy that his family has harbored towards Huntington’s Disease. “The disease wasn’t something one spoke of… it was an embarrassment. But why?” (Seagle and Kristiansen 47.1). The ongoing process of self-discovery is mediated by Superman as an interlocutor of sorts in the mystery of the disease and the ‘why’ of the secrecy. As Steven continuously searches for the reasoning behind everything (including his relationship with Superman), we are given the contrary thought process by his editor, who complains to Steven that: “you don’t work in the real world. You work in fantasy. It doesn’t need to be logical” (Seagle and Kristiansen 31.7). Fantasy and logic are thus placed opposite one another on a spectrum – reality cannot be and should not be fantasy and vice-versa. However, as the narrative progresses, a reconciliation occurs between the fantastic and the real in Steven’s mind and – like psychotherapy via comics – he is able to unify the two poles of this spectrum. Just as Siegel and Shuster (the original creators of Superman) used their character as an empathetic release, so to Steven begins to realize that he can (or perhaps already has been) doing the same thing (Seagle and Kristiansen 49).

The episode entitled ‘Secret Identity’ appears as the pivotal moment in which Steven discovers (or the reader discovers) that Superman has been a method of mediating his experience with the genetic nature of Huntington’s Disease that plagues his mind. Each panel includes contrasting narration and text within the panel borders, heroic mantras of Superman’s prowess in bold narration contrasted with pleas for help in smaller text following after. While we see Superman as the ultimate hero who is perfect and can do no wrong, inside he shouts to “cover
[his] face… give [him] something to hide who [he his]… conceal the man who wears this skin” (Seagle and Kristiansen 51). Instead of reading the title as a pseudonym or fake persona, we can read it as an identity based on secrets. Just like Steven is hiding his real fears from the world, so too Superman must constantly hide himself behind his glasses – “in a world… where people look their loved ones in the eye…. And have no idea who they really are” (Seagle and Kristiansen 51). This is the moment in which Steven realizes that he has been looking at Superman as entirely unlike him when, in fact, they are very much the same. By exploring Superman not as above others but as marginalized like himself, Steven finds the connection he is looking for to write about the hero. He can now begin to realize that it is unnecessary to distance himself from Superman, since “the fantasy that’s become [his] reality seems a whole lot easier at the moment” (Seagle and Kristiansen 75). Although begrudgingly, Seagle mediates his own insecurities through Superman, something he could not do on his own or through conversation alone – only escape into the fantastic allows him to understand his reality. It not only children who at times require a buffer from harsh reality, and Steven is able to both clam his debilitating fear of Huntington’s Disease and better understand the disorder through this fantastic mediation.
Figure 16: *It's a Bird..., 51*

SECRET IDENTITY

SUPERMAN!
COVER MY FACE.

ON THE WATER-FRONT...
GIVE ME SOMETHING TO HIDE WHO I AM.

EVIL-DOERS BEWARE!
VEIL MY IDENTITY FROM THE WORLD THAT’S AGAINST ME.

MAN OF STEEL!
CONCEAL THE MAN WHO WEARS THIS SKIN.

EVENTUALLY...
SCREEN MY SOUL.

LH-OH, TROUBLE!
MARK THE REAL ME FROM THOSE CLOSEST TO ME.

CLARK? WHERE WERE YOU?
--WHERE PEOPLE LOOK THEIR LOVED ONES IN THE EYE--

LATER...
BECAUSE I CAN'T IMAGINE A WORLD--

OUT.
--AND HAVE NO IDEA WHO THEY REALLY ARE.
All-Star Superman by Grant Morrison, Frank Quitely, and Jamie Grant

“All-Star Superman” by [Morrison’s] comics isn’t to subvert or invert the traditions and clichés of the mainstream; it’s to revel in them and amplify their power through art with the ultimate goal of making his reader’s world evolve” (Wolk 259).

Being that It’s a Bird… proves to be a Superman comic not about Superman himself, it is perhaps apt to move into what is a completely ‘stereotypical’ Superman comics series. What sets All-Star Superman apart most from the other superhero series is that – at least within this pocket of the DC universe – Superman dies. One must note that the authors of this series have a lot of freedom with their plot, as what happens in All Star Superman is not part of the Superman canon and exists outside the main line of continuity. Interestingly, the plot is not about how the hero himself is killed (which occurs within the first five pages) but rather how he deals with his imminent death vis-a-vis his duties as defender of the earth and as a part of various relationships. From the very beginning of this serial, Superman is immediately thrust down into the human domain – that is, he is now mortal and need not be seen as completely other by the reader. Morrison notes that “the character [i.e. Superman] has the potential to transcend his humble origins and say something quite profound to those of us living in the secular 21st century” (Singer 260). It is exactly his being of übermensch that allows him to simultaneously act as a surrogate for our emotions while simultaneously being wholly other. As Singer explains:

Morrison and Quitely craft a series of “science fiction fables” (Thill) that harness the outsized, universally recognized characters of the Superman myth to tell stories rich in emotional resonance. Superman confesses his love for Lois Lane, confronts the death of his adoptive father, Jonathan Kent, and faces his own
impending mortality after an overexposure to solar radiation triggers a fatal cellular breakdown. Drawing on his own grief over his father’s death in February 2004, Morrison attempted to translate his sorrow into stories that would speak to his readers’ experiences of “these simple human feelings” (Smith Part 10). *All Star Superman* is a tender emotionally vulnerable story, but not a depressing one; Morrison and Quitely present an idealistic and humanistic interpretation of Superman while they argue that he and other fictions are important for their ability to guide human aspirations. (Singer 23).

That is, rather than a violent story of Superman vs. the villain, this series separates itself as a purposefully emotional text. There is very little violence in *All Star Superman*, and this allows the reader to see their own human feelings within Superman. The first discussion of a philosophy of death does not come from our titular hero, but rather from his arch nemesis Lex Luthor who has effectively poisoned Superman with too much of his power source. A few pages after we see Superman lured into the sun to save a scientific crew from Luthor’s human-bomb mutant, the scene flashes to Luthor controlling this bomb remotely from earth. His admission to the U.S. Army general that he has lied to get out of jail and presumably used military resources includes this ultimate reasoning: “those nasty little spiderwebs of lines around [his] eyes” (Morrison, Quitely, and Grant I 19.2). Luthor realizes that his aging and eventual death is unavoidable, and this realization is interspersed with panels of the death-bomb he has sent to lure Superman to his premature death. There is something universalizing about the inevitability of death that, by virtue of his being invincible, excludes Superman from the mortal connection. As Steven Siegel struggled with earlier in *It’s a Bird*..., it is difficult to connect to someone who possesses
something as utterly unrealistic and foreign as immortality when we are all bound together by death – this new line of continuity within Superman’s world now forces him onto equal footing with humanity in general and to the reader in specific.

The scene in which Superman is told of his inevitable death presents two different reactions the news. While one might expect anger or denial, Superman’s immediate comment is instead acceptance and acknowledgement. His boosted powers due to this sun overexposure allow Superman to see the apoptosis occurring within him as he slowly deteriorates. However, accompanying the stoic pose is a nonchalant comment about his newly acquired powers before finally acquiescing the “bizarre irony [that] the source of [his] powers winds up killing [him], when everything else has failed” (Morrison, Quitely, and Grant 25.1). Contrasting this first panel centered around Superman himself and his thoughts, the page’s final panel moves focus away – leaving Superman facing away from the reader as Mister Quintum finally verbalizes what has only been implied until that point (Morrison, Quitely, and Grant 25.4). This shift from the very open representations of Superman’s thoughts and emotions to the hidden emotion brought upon by only seeing his turned back marginalizes the central figures. That is to say, that even the titular protagonist is given what appears to be induced privacy from the prying eye of the reader, trying to glean minutiae from his reactions to his death notice – and is denied it. The next panel continues this silence from Superman by juxtaposing his facing-back posture with Quintum’s comment that he too is “trying to escape from a doomed world” (Morrison, Quitely, and Grant 26.1). But one must question whether Superman is truly trying to do the same thing.

In the next episode, as Superman admits to Lois Lane that he and Clark Kent are one and the same, we again see a panel with Superman facing away as he is confronted with his
inevitable death. When Lois is showering in the Fortress of Solitude, she fantasizes about marrying Clark/Superman and asks if when she’s “sagging and he looks just the same” in fifteen years, he will still act towards her in the same way (Morrison, Quitely, and Grant 42.3). Even within this diegesis, the characters are all aware that Superman does not age or die. At first happily showing Lois around his secret hideaway, Lois offhandedly asks if there are “no lasting ill effects from [Superman’s] bath in the heart of the Sun” (Morrison, Quitely, and Grant 43.2). The next panel shows Superman looking downward and away from Lois, insisting that he’s feeling “never better” (Morrison, Quitely, and Grant 43.3). The ellipsis preceding that comment marks the hesitation that Superman feels before he responds to Lois, the difficulty in remaining neutral and ‘super’ while knowing that he is dying and will have to leave his love.
Figure 17: All Star Superman, 25

By the time this explains the weird bioelectric discharges, what a bizarre irony if the source of my powers winds up killing me. When everything else has failed.

Our own scan of your cells shows them super-saturated with solar radiation.

Butterman, I'm... sorry.

If I hadn't tried to steal fire from the sun, none of this would have happened.

You risked everything to save my crew and me.

But Luthor has used us to kill you.
Figure 18: All Star Superman, 26

I'M TRYING TO ESCAPE FROM A DOOMED WORLD TOO, SUPERMAN...

IT'S CALLED THE FARE. WHEN I RESURRECTED THE DNA P.R.O.J.E.C.T., AND DIRECTION IT TOWARDS THE ENGINEERING OF NEW HUMAN FORMS, I HAD ONE GOAL IN MIND.

DON'T WORRY, MY PARTNER, ASHTA. I ONLY WANT TO READ YOUR DNA. SHE'S ONE OF OUR SENSITIVES—GENETICALLY ATTUNED TO ALL LIFE.

OH, IT'S LIKE BRICK. IF ONLY WE COULD FIND A WAY TO CRACK THE KRYPTON CODE, WE COULD GROW A SECOND SUPERMAN.

PHOTOSYNTHETIC GIANTS, BIZARRO WORKER DRONES. I DEDICATED P.R.O.J.E.C.T. RESOURCES TOWARD BUILDING A NEW RACE OF SUPERHUMANS IN CASE IN CASE ANYTHING EVER HAPPENED TO YOU.

SHARP TANKING.
The first time we are privy the normative response to death from Superman is during his transformation into ‘anti-Superman’ after exposure to black Kryptonite. At the very end of his battle with Doomsday/Jimmy Olsen, anti-Superman is towered over by Doomsday and even in his lowered mental state, he still realizes his imminent death. We can infer that this anti-Superman has the same memories as the non-altered Superman, and is aware of his less imminent but inevitable death by solar poisoning. Here we finally have the reaction that one would expect from any other character: “Me am die now?... No die!... Me scared…” (Morrison, Quitely, and Grant 101.3). This reaction occurs as a moment that is simultaneously ludicrous and sentimental, thereby distancing the reader from the heavy emotional reaction they might otherwise feel were it not in such an absurd language and situation. When Jimmy retakes control of the murderous Doomsday, and thus spares Superman, Superman is seen whimpering face down on the street expressing what any reader has been thinking during the course of the series: “No die. No can die. Am Superman… no can die” (Morrison, Quitely, and Grant 101.5).
Figure 19: *All Star Superman* (I), 101
Superman is by definition superior to the average human being. Aside from his strength and ability to fly, that which most marks Superman as separate is his invulnerability and thus immortality. Superman has been stoic about his dying up to this point of the series, only breaking his unmoved reaction when under the influence of the reversing black Kryptonite. Only when all of his inhibition has been stripped away can Superman cease to be the übermensch he is and feel genuinely scared and surprised at his imminent fall.

The first volume of *All-Star Superman* concludes with a flashback to Clark Kent’s childhood and the day his father passes away. We are pulled away from the present predicament of Superman’s dying days and are given a reverse view of death, one in which he is able to see his father before his death, but does not change anything about it. This could be read in various ways: it could be that there is no changing the past, and the fight against the time monster will lead to inevitable death no matter how hard the fight. However, we can also see this as a comment that death is inevitable and thus must be embraced in the best circumstances possible. While unable to change anything about his own death, Clark is able to travel back in time and control the circumstances of his own father’s death – i.e. while he cannot save Jonathan Kent, he is able to see his adoptive father one last time at his dying hour.

We can again see Superman’s interaction with death as mediated through other when Lilo and Bar-El eventually degenerate at the end of Episode 9. With visions of grandeur and subjugation of humanity, the two lost Kryptonians ultimately fall to similar poisoning to the one Superman’s. As they rapidly lose their powers and begin to slowly die, Superman is adamantly tries everything he can to save the two. Initially, Bar-El cannot comprehend Superman’s actions “after all [Bar-El] has done still [Superman can] show [him] kindness” (Morrison, Quitely, and
Grant 79.3). We see the ingrained kindness that Superman possesses (and self-reportedly learned from his adoptive father) – that in spite of his own impending death he chooses to save these two Kryptonians who have wrought havoc on the Earth. In the case of Bar-El and Lilo, death is avoided, as they are transported into the Phantom Zone, but Superman can only vicariously evade death through the two.

The tenth episode of the *All-Star Superman* series marks the beginning of Superman’s end, and throughout the episode the writing of his will is interspersed with the plot. We finally are given more insight from Superman himself about his reaction to death – and a majority of it concerns the Earth and those around him more than himself. One of the most contradictory images in the series appears in this antepenultimate section: we see Superman sitting in full uniform but looking ill and aging. Those two descriptors are not ones one would associate with Superman, since he is perfect in every way that man cannot be. However we are now given a visual reality of that which has been in the background throughout the series and which now is openly shocking to the reader. The realization that Superman’s death is imminent is taken calmly and with determination by the hero but the reader is forced via the full-page panel to see the detailed wrinkles on Superman’s face and the bulging veins in his hands. The blue thought bubble which marks Superman’s dictation narrates this page, with the bolded title of his recording, “Superman’s *last will and testament*” (Morrison, Quitely, and Grant 86.1). The bolded words impress upon the reader even more that this is truly the end of Superman, and that he himself recognizes it. The subsequent panel again forces focus away from the ailing hero who, while admitting that “there’s so little time left now” and “the end is getting closer” immediately thinks of others (Morrison, Quitely, and Grant 87.1). The perspective closes on
Superman again and the panels continue, again leaving focus solely on his decrepit state. The hero who both proverbially and literally does not break into a sweat is seen here wiping his drenched forehead while inscribing that “each challenge [he must face] brings [him] closer to death” (Morrison, Quitely, and Grant 87.3). The final panel of this page has zoomed in only to Superman’s face, shocked and still dripping with sweat, looking at his now glistening hand and understanding that, in his words, there “is no time to lose” (Morrison, Quitely, and Grant 87.4). The remaining scenes of this section consist of Superman performing those feats which is his stereotypically associated with: taking sick children to see the pyramids, saving the city from a giant robot, and preventing a suicidal teen from jumping. Even Superman, however, no longer has unlimited time and must choose where to go and who to spend his final day(s) with. Instead of spending time settled with Lois one last time, Superman uses his final hours to save the earth once again, attempting to fulfil as much superhero time as possible before his death.
Figure 21: All Star Superman (II), 87

There's so little time left now.

The end is getting closer and there are still so many things I've yet to achieve.

The time-traveler Samson told me I'd complete twelve legendary Superchallengers before my death.

I would answer the impossible question. Overcome the Typhoid Sun, Bizarro...

...even create life...

Each challenge, of course, brings me closer to my death.

And by my reckoning I've accomplished seven so far.

No time to lose.
In parallel to this final adventure is the evolution of Superman’s Earth Q – a copy of our planet that he uses to test the ability of humans to survive without a Superman protecting them. After various stages of progression (cave paintings, writing, etc.) we see a final glimpse at what the Earth Q humans have achieved: Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster draw Superman. The significance of this moment is twofold: it proves now that humanity can function without a Superhero watching over them, but also that while Superman may die soon, his true immortality comes from his representation. In lieu of a final panel, the authors emblazon the bottom of the page with the word “Neverending” – indicating that death will not be Superman’s end. As Singer concludes

*All Star Superman* suggests that Superman’s most important power – the only one he possesses in the real world – is the power to inspire people by modeling their best qualities courage, altruism, reason, and hope; through such inspiration, fiction can shape the world, an influence Morrison magnifies and literalizes into Superman’s creation of our own world. Depicting our planet and our species as the creations of a fictional character whom we have in turn created, Morrison establishes a reciprocal, inseparable relation between the material and the idea (Singer 265).

The real Superman is that one that is only representational and not flesh-and-blood, yet this Superman is the one that has the true superpowers. The fantastic then bleeds into reality, where illness may seem unbelievable there is power in understanding it through the fantastic within the real world. Ultimately, one need not be a Superman to use this particular superpower of inspiration.
Figure 22: *All Star Superman (II)*, 105

I really think this is it...

Third time lucky. This is the one...

...this is going to change everything.

NEVERENDING
Chapter 4: Conclusions

The fantastic is often associated with that which can never be real and can only exist in a separate realm of the imaginary. Flight, super strength, and immortality may be impossible in reality, but the fantastic can still directly impact our relationship with the world. Mediation through the fantastic is oftentimes the only way for some to understand and cope with their reality, as we have seen. Children like Jean-Christophe and Pierre-Francois must use their imaginative fantasies to represent that which is not representable, namely their interactions with debilitating epilepsy, either vicariously or directly. Demented individuals like Emilio and his fellow institution-mates have only fleeting differentiation between the real and the fantastic, and only through realizing that can be we begin to truly understand their condition. Steven grapples with his very fictional relationship to Superman while simultaneously fighting his own, very real, fear of Huntington’s Disease. And, finally, Superman the supreme fiction explores death in a way that can teach us how to approach death while inhabiting this reality without supermen.

Ian Williams, one of the forerunners of Graphic Medicine as an academic discipline argues that “graphic fiction with (or indeed without) a medical theme could be a useful source of illness narrative on which clinicians, healthcare or social work professionals and scholars of narrative can draw” (Williams p.21). We can take this even further, asking whether other realms of scholarship that are excluded should be explored for nontraditional usage. Works categorized as niche or juvenile or non-academic may have merit that is not immediately apparent. Though still not well explored, it is my hope that this work pushes for more serious conversation about the fantastic and its ability to mediate the most difficult aspects of our life, namely sickness and death. By opening ourselves to exploration of our fantasies rather than being grounded solely a
demand for realism, we may find ourselves engaging with the real in ways hereto untried – and ultimately find that drives our own reality.
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ACADEMIC VITA

EDUCATION

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Bachelor of Arts in Honors Comparative Literature and
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Minors in Spanish and International Studies

Graduation: May 2015

CIEE-Alicante, Alicante, Spain
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Spring 2013

WORK EXPERIENCE

Pennsylvania State University Ambulance Service
Emergency Medical Technician – Crew
• Provide care for the sick and injured on Penn State’s campus and at all Penn State events
Jan. 2014 - Present

RESEARCH AND PUBLICATIONS

Penn State Hershey Medical Center, Department of Anesthesiology
• Research Assistant to Prof. Sonia Vaida, MD
    o Clinical Correlates to One Year Mortality Following Tracheostomy of Adult Intensive Care Patients. Grap, S., Huntley C., High K., Goldenberg, M., Blosser, S., Wojnar, M., Schaefer E., Vaida S. Accepted for Publication, April 2015
Jun. 2011 - Present

VOLUNTEERING AND COMMUNITY SERVICE

JDRC (Jewish Disaster Relief Corps) Alternative Spring Break, Moore, Oklahoma, U.S.A
• Repair of multiple sites (homes and farms) affected by the tornados of Spring 2013
Apr. 2014

Penn State University Ambulance Service - Volunteer
Emergency Medical Technician

JDC (Joint Distribution Committee) Alternative Spring Break, Kishinev/Chisinau, Moldova
Apr. 2011
- Rebuilding the city’s Jewish old-age home and volunteering with children at the Jewish Community Center

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Languages:
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