



## **Getaway**

**Beth Dawson**

The output, a graphic story and creative project, narrates a story in response to the 2015 refugee crisis.

### **Research process**

As practice research, the comic looks to innovate approaches within the medium by attempting to use creative methods to tell traumatic stories sensitively whilst priming the reader to have an empathetic and personal response. It contributes to a body of contemporary comic work exploring and evolving sequential illustrative practice through unpicking and challenging its stylistic visual language. This piece investigates the aesthetic and tonal use of nostalgia as a means of personalising a narrative. Additionally, the comic actively explores using narrative structures such as misdirection, emotive character design and world building as prompts for the reader to place themselves at the heart of a global as a visual counter to metaphors such as “cockroaches”, “swarm” and “tropes of inundation” were all used in the media at the time.

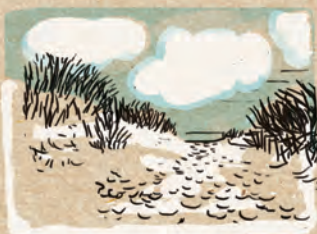
### **Research Insights**

The research contributes to knowledge of communicating realistic emotive accounts through illustrated fictionalised stories. Getaway is one of a series of comics by the author to explore the appropriateness of specific aesthetics within a comic to set the mood and tone. The author’s intention is to explore visual styles which create and build words most appropriate for empathising with stories as a counter to notions of ‘othering.’

### **Dissemination**

The output has been published and widely shared online. In 2015, it was shortlisted in the Jonathan Cape/Comica/Observer graphic short story prize and showcased as part of the awards ceremony in the finalists’ exhibition at Orbital comics. The piece was also exhibited at Sunny Bank Mills, Farsley as part of the 2019 ‘Panel Show’ exhibition where Dawson also wrote about the methods and ethical considerations around the comic’s creation for an article in the arts funded publication which documented the exhibition.



















PANEL SHOW EXHIBITION

SUNNY  
BANK  
MILLS  
APPROVED

THE MEGA-SUPER  
AMAZING

ZINE

FEATURING WORDS AND PICTURES  
TO INTRIGUE THE IMAGINATION

Dave  
Sunny



## TELLING SERIOUS TALES : WHOSE STORIES DO WE TELL AND HOW BEST DO WE TELL THEM? by Beth Dawson

**Practical case studies in navigating the sensitivities of 'made-up' narratives, the graphic memoir and fictionalising the experiences of others within comics.**

My route into comics and graphic storytelling is a pedestrian tale for a 30-something art schooled Brit where, back in the early noughties, within the university studios we passed about copies of the *Acme Novelty Library* series, *Maus* and *Black Hole*. I'd read *Beryl the Peril* as a child so I knew how comics worked, but it was this new exposure to more 'serious' comics that hooked me in. More specifically it was perhaps *Black Hole* and the way the author Charles Burns' visualized a story where you would find yourself being played off between word and image, unsure of which to trust (or of reality itself), which got to me the most. That book was such a visceral experience, I'm not sure I really understood it, or if I could say fully that I *liked* it but it made me question what this medium of comics was all about and what its limits could be.

As my interest in comics matured and became more diverse, I was drawn most to confessional style fiction and graphic memoirs: Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home*, Craig Thompson's *Blankets*, the Tamakis' *This One Summer* as well as Raymond Briggs' *Ethel & Ernest*. These 'honest' and everyday tales captivated me, particularly how the narrator's inner thoughts and experiences reverberated around rich landscapes and scenery where dialogue, mood and moment would mingle across the pages to capture a detailed sense of time and place.

When I began to experiment with my own smaller scale comics, my agenda was to play around with a similarly strong sense of place fused with narratives influenced by my favourite written novelists and their intimate, emotive and often melancholy tales. However, there has always been a tension for me about where these stories come from; should I only talk about my life and what I know? How do I talk about the lives of others and the experiences I haven't had? Even in fiction how much creative licence is allowed when to 'make something up' before this turns into a collection of lazy assumptions that miss the mark or feel like well-worn clichés?



The first comic I made was called 'After Life,' and described the experience of losing a partner, something I have no first-hand experience of. The poem which the comic is based on was written after my aunt's funeral, in response to what my family were going through.

However, it was only after losing my own father suddenly I felt better equipped to draw up and create an account of grief that felt so big. On reflection, sometimes our motivations are only revealed after writing a story and I realised much later after returning to *After Life*, that actually the story is perhaps most realistically an account of my own anxieties around losing a partner.

Sticking steadfastly to only writing from accounts of your own experience is not, of course, without its own complexities and sensitivities either. When discussing this idea with the co-curator of the Panel Show exhibition Si Smith, we talked about the graphic memoirs we've both read and the issues related to writing 'your truth'. Perhaps the most enticing memoirs bring out the voyeur in us all where we seek revealing or controversial truths. But when the story you tell actually happened how do the real-life antagonists feel about how they've been portrayed? How do your supporting cast feel about being reduced down to caricature and having their private conversations and opinions immortalised on the page?

The broader value of the autobiographical mode has also often been brought up for critique. In the book, *Alternative Comics*, Charles Hatfield opens up debate around writing autobiographically by questioning how true "these self-centered reflections [can] be? How accurate?" and that "At some point the appearance of bracing 'honesty' runs the risk of hardening into self-serving repetitive shtick." (p114, 2005). Whilst this statement is intentionally inflammatory to unpick a discussion, it serves well to highlight a potential backlash to sticking only with stories we know.



Revisiting an earlier point, I became fascinated with comics through becoming increasingly aware of the medium's potential and the range of application for comics which goes far beyond its stereotype of Superhero stories or the classic British cartoons its most well known for. Comics are brilliant not only for telling a funny or fantastical story, but as a rich creative tool for breaking down, sharing and explaining information. They can be made to be highly accessible through being cheap to reproduce, quick to read and share, and can actively support literacy and language barriers through a picture's ability to support words. Comics are a potent medium often overlooked as a genre with an outdated reputation for serving only children and comics fanatics. This typecasting can mask the comic's infinite versatility.

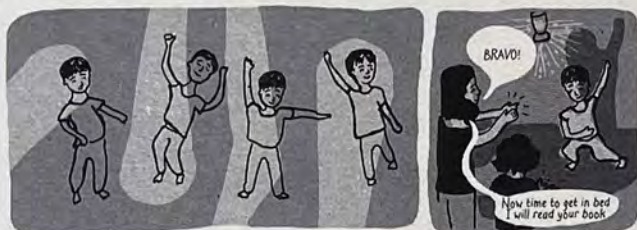
Comics are equally able to: explain a complex PhD thesis to make it enthralling to the layman (see *Unflattering* by Nick Sousanis), narrate the process of battling with cancer and losing a loved one (*In Waves*, AJ Dungo), as well as entertain your children brilliantly during a testing journey (see the whole history of comics for children).

If the possibility for comics and their application as a tool for communication is so broad, it follows then that through developing the skill of comic storytelling and a deeper understanding of the comic's application, the comic author is mastering their power to communicate ideas and their knowledge of how these can impact or influence an audience.



In 2015 when I made "Getaway" I found myself compelled to narrate the experience of a group of children caught up in the European refugee crisis to see if somehow my comics could help.

Having seen the stories on the news, I was keen to try to humanize the experience of a displaced family as a reaction to my own feeling that a number of governments within Europe were slow to respond directly and humanely to the crisis. At the time, around 4,000 migrants and refugees were living in Calais at the camp which became known as The Jungle. Of this number, many were lone women and unaccompanied children, with Unicef going on to estimate that there were at least 500 unaccompanied children living across French refugee sites in March 2016.



A former holiday destination, the Jules Ferry Camp in Calais was repurposed as a centre for the most vulnerable women and children, however this quickly filled up and many more were left to set up makeshift homes in tents close by where unaccompanied children would stick together for safety, forming surrogate families. Reports at the time described how women were often some of the most vulnerable within the camps, where violence would break out between different groups and incidents of sexual violence and trafficking began to break in the news. Young women were reported to be hiding in their tents, staying awake until daylight in fear of being found alone.

News reports detailed how aid workers, volunteers and locals were amassing to do their bit to support the refugees who were turning up at the camp from a vast array of countries in conflict. Those working to support the camps helped to set up schools, churches, a library, meal stations, essential goods handouts, toiletries, clothing, toys and even a disco.

My memory of the photographs and footage coming out at the time recalls seeing The Jungle filling up with a range of old camping paraphernalia, vintage toys and books seemingly donated by the well-meaning public to the cause. This included Canvas tents, gaudy 70s sun loungers, Ladybird books and picnic blankets. These objects were all distinctly familiar, and similar items appear in many of the photographs and memories from my own happy childhood. Having spent most of the summers of my formative years catching the ferry to France to camp in places just like the sand dunes of Calais, the backdrop to the refugee crisis was also disturbingly familiar. This place was home to summer holidays with my family and it was hard to fathom two such different experiences happening in the same space.

For me, this triggered a feeling that my story was entangled and invested in the families I was witnessing on the news. I found myself searching for stories where people made it to safety and got increasingly upset and frustrated with the language being used in relation to those risking their lives to get to the camps at the time. David Cameron described the people caught up in the crisis as a 'swarm,' whilst Katie Hopkins in a piece of writing for The Sun likened them to 'cockroaches.'



My key intention was to counter the contemptuous and dehumanizing words used in some of the media by choosing instead to create scenes of warmth, human connection and tenderness prevailing in the face of the dire, dark and precarious situations the refugees were in. I was cautious about portraying these refugees and deliberated over how to construct a fictional story for something so serious. I was also wary of placing too many words into the mouths of my characters and with no direct access to individual people who had lived the experience, I reasoned that there was a limitation on the specifics which would be appropriate for me to go into. The four page comic became a challenge to make an often de-personalised media story into something more personal whilst retaining a sense of a universal struggle which applied to the many caught up in the crisis. But how do you write a tale that feels personal whilst being mindful to not claim ownership of other people's experiences? And how do you begin to approach authoring the thoughts and feelings of others without their consultation?

The more personal comics I've made previously were told using memoir styles which relied heavily on my own personal insights to accredit the story. These comics were often narrated through the use of inner dialogue; a mode which removes entirely the boundary between the self and the audience and where the reader experiences the story as if they are inside the author's own consciousness. This mode is appropriate for navigating personal thoughts but far more sensitive to work with when telling other people's stories. Instead, I reasoned it better to place more of a respectful boundary between the author, the reader and the real lives of the people my character's depicted. I resolved the best solution to do this was to use a minimal amount of speech with no internal monologue or narration beyond the imagery, so as not to encroach too far into interpreting the individual and private experiences of the refugees I represented.

When making Getaway I was also interested in exploring whether the language of the personal could be conveyed through the tone and aesthetic of a comic. Getaway adopts a nostalgic children's picture book feel with the intention to prompt the reader to revisit their own nostalgic memories to experience the story of others from this perspective.



The comic uses misdirection to lull the reader into a seemingly innocent story about a family trip to the seaside which by nightfall switches to a frantic tale where the family are found dramatically running away from the camp to stowaway in a lorry. At the end of the story, we leave the family cold and scared and hoping to find themselves in a better place by the morning. The comic is intentionally set-up to replicate my personal response to the refugees at Calais where my own childhood memories became uncomfortably entangled with the refugees; It turns my own reaction into a method to attempt to provoke the reader to engage with and pay notice to the real people behind the story.



In an article titled "Whose Life Is it Anyway" The novelist Maggie Gee suggest authors, "feel our way into our characters until, effectively, we are them as we write them. This is very like the definition of empathy, or its German origin word, *empathie*, "feeling our way into another". (The Guardian Online, 2016). As I researched all the news articles and stories which informed my characters, I inevitably felt more involved with the crisis. I still find the predicament of the three fictional children I created weighs heavily on my mind and when I am reminded of them, I am reminded of the real situation they have become a symbol for. Whilst the story is fictional, the story structure and world of Getaway is collaged together and gathered from an accumulation of articles and journalist's photos of the time. Much of the images and scenarios which inspired the comic can be found across the archive of reports published: from pictures of people from the camps going to fish for food on the beaches right next to tourists sunbathing, to the bakery owners who would visit daily to hand out bread. From the older girls who adopted younger children to look after, to the parents who worked hard to keep a tidy and as normal-as-possible home in squalid conditions (and the aid workers who provided the books, toys and resources for this). Finally the comic pays homage to the pictures of children playing on the camps, continuing with their childhood in spite of their desperate situations.

The use of nostalgia has recently been much discussed in the media in relation to politics and propaganda and as a tool to promote nationalism where a mythical 'golden age' is constructed through idealised and sentimental imagery to evoke a sense of 'better times'. In part, my reasoning for using nostalgia as an aesthetic within Getaway was not only to pull the reader into their own childhoods to experience the story from this empathetic standpoint, but to reclaim the aesthetic for another purpose. Perhaps my aim was to counter nostalgia's use as a protectionist or nationalist tool. I gave nostalgia, with all its etymological routes based in the greek word 'nostos' (home) and 'lagos' (pain) to the truly homesick; to the many whose homes have been turned to rubble and to the agenda of those who have no homes they can return to.

In a number of respects, the approach used to create "Getaway" through its none-specificness and use of journalistic evidence to piece the elements of the story together, side steps a hotbed of difficult topics related to narrating the lives of others where issues of misrepresentation can often come up. Perhaps adopting a journalistic method or approach when looking to draw in urgent response to contemporary issues offers a useful code for comic artists. Getaway is not without its clunkiness and it is so short it does little to truly unpick a story of human suffering. It does however end with a call to action, where I hope most readers will leave actively invested in the children's story, enough to perhaps consider what part they could play in the real lives of those represented within the story. To further this call to action and as part of attempting to ensure the comic serves those it depicts, all artist's sales from the comic and accompanying prints have gone and will always go to charities who support refugees and invest in legal approaches to bringing them to safety.

As the medium of comics matures I am sure it will continue to ask more questions than it gives answers as to how complex stories can be most appropriately and economically told. I look forward to seeing more diverse examples of how to handle and tell an ever-complex array of stories. We should all be excited for this evolution.

Beth Dawson, 2019





*IT'S ART! FROM COMICS!!!*

# PANEL SHOW

*Panel Show is/was a seven-week long exhibition at  
the Sunny Bank Mill gallery in Farsley, near Leeds.*

*Celebrating comic book art in all its forms, the show featured work by*

*Anna Mill, Beth Dawson, Cat Farris, Charlott Kristensen,  
Charlotte Bailey, Darryl Cunningham, Dean Ormston,  
Disa Wallander, Doctor Simpo, Flameboy, Gabby Schulz,  
Graham Manley, Jacky Fleming, Jade Sarson, Jeff Anderson,  
Joe Decie, Jonathan Edwards, Jules Scheele, Kate Charlesworth,  
Katriona Chapman, Laura Howell, Lee Thacker, Luke Healy,  
Luke Pearson, Mawil, Mike Maihack, MyF Tristram, Rebecca K Jones,  
Rob Davis, Sally Jane Thompson, Sara Varon, Shazleen Khan,  
Si Smith, Siku, Tillie Walden, Tom Gauld, Una,  
Warwick Johnson Cadwell and Zara Slattery.*

*This zine was made to accompany the exhibition.*

*#panelshowexhibition*



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## **Evidence of Dissemination**

<https://davidgalletly.com/getaway>

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