

TERESA WONG

I HEAR THE IMAGE WORLD CALLING TO ME

The making of a graphic memoir



DEAR SCARLET MEMOIR, PHOTO BY KELLY MACDONALD

In early 2020, Kate Beaton posted a short autobiographical comic strip on Twitter that I think about almost every time I draw. In the comic, the award-winning Canadian cartoonist depicts herself toiling away at her graphic novel manuscript, then taking a coffee break with her mother, who cheerfully says, “You know, it doesn’t take any time at all to read a book when it’s cartoons. I’m halfway through the one you gave me this morning!” The final panel shows Beaton, haggard yet resigned, saying, “Cool.”

I am convinced the most time-consuming way to create a book is as a graphic narrative. Each panel is a small work of art and putting together a full manuscript requires drawing and redrawing the entire book several times. And yes, I find it deflating to think that, after all the work that goes into them, most graphic novels are read in one sitting. But what bothers me most is when graphic books are disparaged as somehow less “literary” than their prose counterparts.

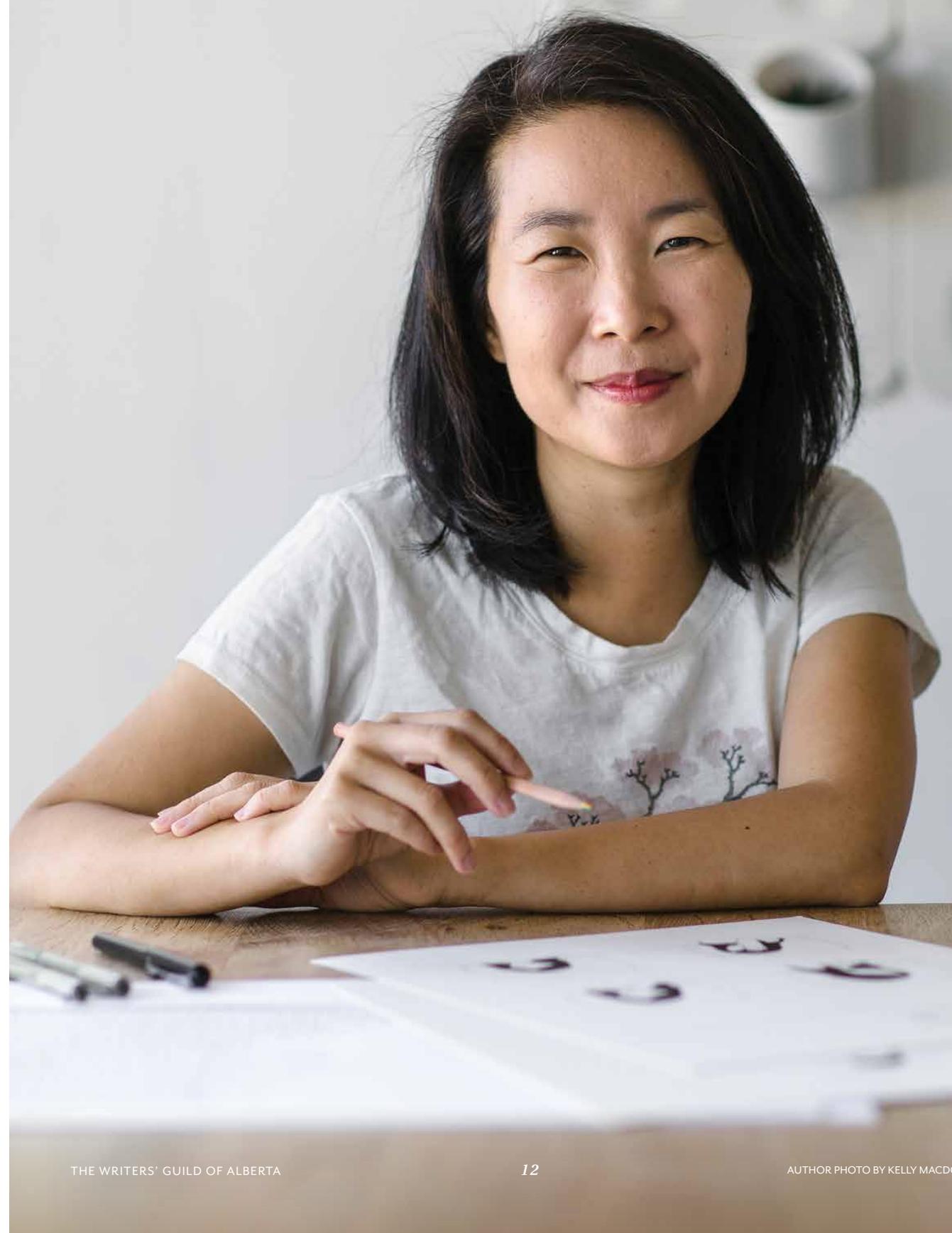
Because a story is easy to read does not make it less worthy as literature, and graphic novels have proven in the past 30 years that they have serious literary value, telling sophisticated, multi-layered narratives with intricate plots and rich character development.

From Jeff Lemire’s fictionalized Southwestern Ontario community in *Essex County* to Marjane Satrapi’s childhood experiences during Iran’s Islamic Revolution in *Persepolis*, the best graphic narratives challenge readers to make meaning from the complexities of life. As with all good literature, graphic novels are nuanced and powerful, pulling you in and staying with you long after you’ve put the book down.

In recent years, literary prize committees have recognized the rise of graphic narratives in the mainstream. For the first time in its history, the Scotiabank Giller Prize included a graphic novel, Seth’s *Clyde Fans*, on its 2020 longlist. Similarly, in 2018, the Man Booker Prize longlisted Nick Drnaso’s *Sabrina*, a work Zadie Smith called “the best book—in any medium—I have read about our current moment.”

About five years ago, I realized that reading graphic novels and memoirs made me want to create my own, no matter how difficult or tedious the process. Although I was a writer with no illustrating skills, I knew the story I was working on—about my first child’s birth and my subsequent struggle with postpartum depression—would be best told as a comic. So much of new motherhood is spent in silence. You are stuck at home with nobody to talk to other than a baby, and I wanted to convey just how quiet and lonely I was during that time.

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Back then, I wrote prose exclusively, and I assumed I would find a collaborator to illustrate the book, but I also had a vision of what it would look like, so I bought a sketchbook and got to work. I cut my script into small chunks and pasted the pieces on the left (verso) side of each page and began sketching rough “storyboard” panels on the right (recto) side.

While doing so, I tried to keep in mind everything I loved about the compelling graphic narratives I’d read—how creators like Satrapi, Simone Lia, Adrian Tomine, Alison Bechdel, Ivan Brunetti and others convey meaning through text, images and sequential panels. There are things you can only do in comics, such as stopping time and having the reader explore a narrative in a non-linear way. Lucy Knisley does this by incorporating whimsical diagrams into her work and Richard McGuire, in *Here*, layers fragments of narrative from multiple periods onto the same page.

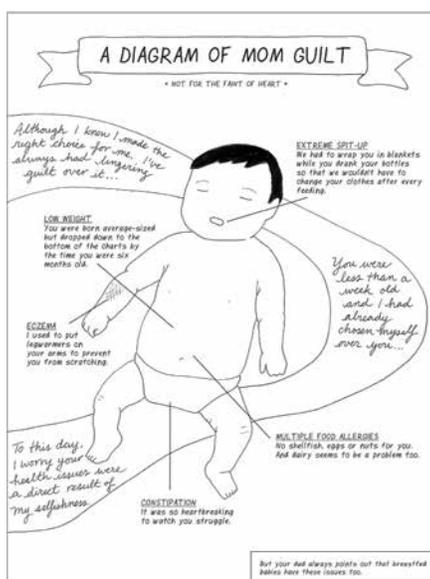


ILLUSTRATION FROM *DEAR SCARLET*

As a newer—arguably “outsider”—form of literature, graphic narratives are often experimental and creators are growing in ambition, testing the boundaries of what’s possible through the marriage of words and pictures. This experimentation is exciting and inspiring to me, both as a reader and a creator.

The months I spent on the book’s first draft (storyboard) were some of the most invigorating of my life. Through making marks on paper and trying to communicate not only verbally but visually, I rediscovered what cartoonist

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and educator Lynda Barry calls “the image world,” a place we all accessed regularly as children but which many of us left long ago. In her books and workshops, Barry talks about why drawing and writing are not separate activities for little kids and why our creative selves suffer a profound loss when we cease to draw.

According to Barry, drawing is an essential human activity, just like singing and dancing, and it helps writers access deeper, more resonant imagery. She says, “Drawing is one of our native languages... and as its own language, drawing allows you to express things that you can’t just do with words in the same way.”

Once I finished storyboarding my book, I showed it to an illustrator friend, hoping he would help me draw it. After reading it, he refused, saying, “It is such a personal story. It has to come from your own hand.” Despite my embarrassingly amateur skills, I Googled “How to draw a graphic novel” and started working. Six months later, I had a second draft.

I redrew the manuscript a third time and Arsenal Pulp Press published it in 2019. While I cringe at the quality of some illustrations in the book, I am glad I told the story as a graphic narrative. The comics format gave me the chance to explore and relate my experience with new motherhood in a visceral yet subtle way. I believe that memoirs can benefit from a graphic treatment because comics are adept at handling interiority and distinctive points of view.



ILLUSTRATION FROM *DEAR SCARLET*

makes me feel younger and more alive. It has brought a playfulness to my work that benefits both my prose and my comics.

Fun is not the same as easy, however. And as I work on my next graphic memoir, the thought of pencilling and inking page after page over many months—possibly years—is daunting. But it is a worthwhile pursuit, regardless of how quickly a reader might devour the book or whether graphic narratives get the accolades and awards they deserve. I hear the image world calling to me in my native language, and I must answer. ■

Teresa Wong is the author of the graphic memoir Dear Scarlet: The Story of My Postpartum Depression. The book was a finalist for The City of Calgary W.O. Mitchell Book Prize and was longlisted for CBC Canada Reads 2020. Her comics have appeared in The Believer, Event Magazine and The Rumpus. Learn more at byteresawong.com.