

**Graphic Medicine and Mental Health: Exploring Psychological Disorders in *The Bad Doctor* and *Marbles***

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**Abstract**

Graphic medicine, the use of comics to explore health and illness, has gained significant attention. This study examines how graphic novels, specifically *The Bad Doctor* by Ian Williams and *Marbles* by Ellen Forney, depict mental illness. *The Bad Doctor* portrays a physician grappling with obsessive-compulsive disorder, while *Marbles* follows a cartoonist's journey with bipolar disorder. Through visual metaphors, symbolism, and panel sequencing, these narratives offer intimate glimpses into the lived experiences of mental illness, fostering empathy and understanding. By analyzing conversational elements and imagery within a framework of "critical empathy," this qualitative content analysis investigates how these graphic novels effectively communicate the complexities of mental health challenges and contribute to destigmatization. This research aims to advance the field of graphic medicine by demonstrating the potential of visual narratives for public education and facilitating open discussions about mental illness.

**Keywords:** Graphic Medicine, Mental Health, The Bad Doctor, Marbles, Critical Empathy Theory

**Introduction**

'Words have the power to both heal and harm and when it comes to mental health, the use of language can make all the difference.' - Joanne Nicholson

In contemporary society, the discourse on mental health is pervasive, often conveyed through an array of media representations. Social media feeds, and news articles: The

conversation about mental health is now heard more than ever. Nevertheless, quite a few mediums go neglected in that conversation: one such is the application of graphic medicine (a combination of comics and healthcare) to express matters concerning mental health. Graphic medicine has established its credibility by being able to depict difficult and stigmatized health concerns in a way that is both visually attractive and understandable. Graphic medicine as a genre, provides a perfect vehicle for sharing personal accounts of mental illness or the experience and nature of psychological disorders. Graphic medicine is a genre, The visual narrative from graphic medicine represents mental health in great depth in the select works i.e., *'Marbles'* by Ellen Forney and *'The Bad Doctor'* by Ian Williams.

In *Marbles*, Ellen Forney records her battle with bipolarity in a raw and unflinching way. Forney chronicles her diagnosis, treatment, and management through the use of illustrations as well as words. The use of visuals in *'Marbles'* helps the reader experience what it is like to live with bipolarity, something that mere words may lack. Forney's graphic novel, then: From the chaotic and erratic aesthetic of manic episodes to the muted, dark reception that illustrates depressive ones--Forney takes us on this rollercoaster ride that is bipolarity.

Likewise, in Ian Williams' *The Bad Doctor*, the protagonist is a general practitioner wrestling with his problems of mental health. A physician himself, Williams draws on his own experience and those of the people he sees to tell a compelling tale about stigma and mental health professionals. Through his illustrations, Williams depicts the ways that mental health affects not only those who experience it but also society and healthcare as a whole. He takes on the concept of doctors being infallible and starts a dialogue about how to get help and shatter barriers of stigma.

"Graphic medicine puts the patient at the center of the story, allowing them to tell their own story in their own voice. This can be a powerful act of empowerment, giving patients a sense of agency and control over their own narratives." (Green, 3)

Graphic medicine, when used for representing mental health, not only helps people understand psychological disorders but also serves as a means of enabling those afflicted. Through voicing and bringing visibility to their experiences, people with mental health problems can subvert the dominant narratives about them. The reverse, too, is true: This can destroy stigmas and misconceptions about mental health. But graphic medicine provides a language with which people suffering from psychological problems can gain an understanding of their disorders. Through the expression of their own experiences, people with mental health problems can contest and subvert the mainstream discourses about them. On the other hand, such a

humanizing process can dismantle misconceptions and myths that surround mental illness. The employment of graphic medicine to express mental health can not only result in a higher level of understanding for people who suffer from psychological disorders but also give them some kind of empowerment. When individuals with mental illnesses have their voices and visions given to them, they can contradict the macro narratives engulfing their condition. Then, this can reduce the myths and prejudices that commercialize mental health.

Throughout medical history, heroic physicians and their scientific or clinical discoveries have dominated popular culture. These achievements are typically accompanied by iconographic imagery that elevates the action. This history needs to be more comprehensive, though. From the birth of comics through to their “golden age,” and on up-to-date works in graphic medicine, this exhibit covers an exceptional history of visualizing illness outside written sources as well as tracking how Western healthcare practices changed, widening our knowledge base about just what counts when constructing medical history. Interactions Between Sufferers, Practitioners, and Clinical Sequence Inspired by serialized prints, illustrated newspapers and magazines; comic books (including classic long-running series from the 1970s and more recent manga covers); consignment zines (small works intended for physical distribution); and digital comics created over time on the Internet or published in print. Over the past 60 years, the field and functions of health-related comics have expanded, starting with underground comics and zines. Since then, it has become a topic for investigation and creation from numerous starting points: graphic medicine is now an area firmly established among scholars. These subjects cover gender and sexuality, disabilities, health disparities, the environment, justice, and ethics. Unlike traditional picture books (whether of the Han dynasty or 19th century Europe), not only are they contemporary creations by sufferers themselves; but these new works also expand both narrative scope and iconographic conventions in capturing a modern-day illness. ([Re]Framing Graphic Medicine: Comics and the History of Medicine)

In particular, storytelling in pictorial form which combines narrative and visual elements is especially effective at promoting the understanding of mental health. Creators harness the forces of imagery to continue probing and presenting mental well-being's obscured side, and its multiplicity. Through this quaint mixture of words and pictures, people can relate to the human side of mental illness that they cannot appreciate from clinical statistics. With personal experience stories and the shattering of stereotypes, the result is a dialogue about mental illness that pays attention to open-mindedness and humanity. Furthermore, the educational qualities of visual narratives make it possible for people to familiarize themselves with

different types of mental illness and what they look like; as well as all kinds of coping methods. This information can reach a wide audience of readers, and it raises general awareness. Just as visual storytelling uses a metaphoric way of expression that allows us to understand more intangibles - abstract emotions, for example perhaps even more importantly the very vehicle of promoting dialogue and advocacy itself makes it an agent serving up change in mental health.

### Critical Empathy Theory

The study's core is critical empathy theory, which acts as a lens through which to understand and decipher graphic medicine and mental health representation between the two. There isn't a single individual credited with creating a fully-fledged "Critical Empathy Theory." The term itself seems to be in flux and evolving rather than being a solidified, unified theory with a singular originator. However, several thinkers and concepts contribute to the discussion of critical empathy and its application to understanding and addressing issues related to mental illness.

Here are some key figures and their contributions:

- **Andrea Lobb:** Her 2017 article "*Critical Empathy*" introduced the term within critical social theory, emphasizing the limitations of traditional empathy and advocating for a critical engagement with the power dynamics embedded in empathetic encounters. While she didn't claim full ownership of the concept, her work lays the groundwork for further exploration. (Lobb)
- **Axel Honneth:** His work on intersubjectivity and social recognition resonates with critical empathy's focus on understanding suffering and injustice through embodied experiences. He argues that negative emotions like anger and shame can reveal social tensions and call for empathetic engagement to address the underlying causes. (Petherbridge)
- **David Foster Wallace:** His essay "*Consider the Lobster*" challenged uncritical compassion and advocated for a nuanced understanding of empathy, especially regarding experiences of pain and suffering. This echoes critical empathy's emphasis on critical reflection and avoiding simplistic emotional responses. (Wallace)
- **Sara Ahmed:** Her concept of "willful subjects" challenges dominant narratives and power structures related to mental illness. This aligns with critical empathy's aim to shift focus from individual pathology to broader social contexts and potential injustices faced by individuals with mental illness. (Ahmed)

The theory holds that generating critical empathy involves sympathetically delving into the subjective experiences of people with mental illness. The purpose of this lens

is to highlight empathy as an agent for social change and to provoke a richer understanding of the emotional dimension of mental health struggles.

According to the study, graphic novels such as *"Marbles"* and *"The Bad Doctor"* are powerful vehicles for promoting critical empathy. These graphic works use metaphor, symbolism, and visual metaphors to allow the reader a sense of being part of an intense personal experience confronting bipolarity and depression. Not only does the visual storytelling of one's inner life bring to light the complexity and various faces of mental illness, but it also invites readers into empathy with this or that person's innermost thoughts. Furthermore, the text points out that graphic medicine functions to destroy stigmas and misconceptions related to mental health as these visual narratives become an important stage for people with mental health problems to let out their own stories, subvert existing stories, and turn the tables on societal prejudice. Graphic medicine is presented as a way of emancipation, giving people the chance to confront and even contradict macro-narratives about mental health. This connection with critical empathy theory is most apparent when talking about the historical preponderance of heroic physician narratives in medical history. The turn towards graphic medicine is a break from the typical medical representation, providing not only doctors with new information and insight into illness but also people who have personally experienced psychological problems.

The text also emphasizes the value of visual narratives in helping people learn about various kinds of mental illness and how to cope with them. Words and pictures are a potent means of encouraging dialogue about mental health issues, in graphic medicine has become a change agent.

### ***Marbles and The Bad Doctor: A Visual Exploration of Mental Illness***

*'Marbles'* is a deeply personal and introspective graphic novel written and illustrated by author and artist Ellen Forney. The novel chronicles Forney's journey with bipolar disorder and her struggles with mental illness. Through a unique blend of artwork, narrative, and dialogue, Forney takes readers on a visual exploration of the complexities of mental illness, challenging societal stigmas and shedding light on the realities of living with a psychological disorder. The novel follows Forney's experience from her initial diagnosis to her eventual acceptance and management of her condition. With honesty and vulnerability, Forney shares her highs and lows, her fears, and insecurities, and ultimately, her journey toward self-acceptance and understanding.

Mental illness is a topic that is frequently veiled in stigma and misinformation. However, there has been a rising push in recent years to shed light on these misunderstandings of human health. Ian Williams' graphic book *"The Bad Doctor"* is

one of the most recent works to add to this style. *"The Bad Doctor"* is set in a small town in the United Kingdom and follows Dr. Iwan James, a general practitioner who is dealing with his mental health while attempting to help his patients. The story delves into the complexity of mental illness through the eyes of a psychiatrist who is meant to be a source of strength and stability for his patients. One of the most remarkable parts of *"The Bad Doctor"* is the use of graphics to depict the feeling of mental illness. This topic may be explored uniquely and compellingly thanks to the graphic book style. Williams' artwork captures the chaotic and sometimes overpowering aspect of mental illness. The mix of vibrant colors and distorted pictures successfully conveys the bewildering and upsetting experience that many people suffering from mental illness go through.

Many individuals may identify with Dr. Iwan James's story. Despite being a doctor, he battles with his mental health and is frequently unable to deal with the demands of his position. This serves as a sharp reminder that mental illness may impact anybody, regardless of career or social standing. The story also focuses on the problems of healthcare practitioners, who are supposed to be healers yet frequently disregard their well-being in the process. *"The Bad Doctor"* puts attention on the many kinds of mental illness and the impact they have on individuals and their loved ones via the numerous cases that Dr. James sees. The novel depicts a wide range of experiences and obstacles experienced by persons living with mental illness, from sadness and anxiety to bipolar disorder and addiction. This not only serves to dispel prejudices and misconceptions but also emphasizes the significance of getting aid and support.

One of the novel's most moving scenes is when Dr. James seeks therapy for his mental health issues. This is a strong message that seeking treatment is not a sign of weakness, but rather a courageous and important step toward recovery. It also underlines the need for mental health practitioners to take care of themselves to serve others effectively. Fortunately, there has recently been a push in the media for more accurate and sympathetic portrayals of mental illness. Television programs like *'This Is Us'* and *'BoJack Horseman'* have shown mental health issues and treatment more realistically and sympathetically. These performances also stressed the need to seek treatment and the impact of stigma on people suffering from mental disorders.

### **Shadows of the Mind: Psychological Disorders in *Marbles* and *The Bad Doctor***

*'Marbles'* is not just a story about one person with bipolarity, it also investigates the larger issue of mental illness in society and how people have been affected by it. In

this way, through her art, Forney presents a picture of the psychological tumult that people with mental illness experience- the ups and downs; mirror-like reflection from one mind to another. Perhaps the most powerful aspect of '*Marbles*' is Forney's use of color. It is mostly black and white, with occasional glorious splashes of color to illustrate her vividly colored manic fits.

One quote that stands out in the novel is, 'The trouble with mania was that you achieved it. It was heaven, but then you crashed and burned in the hell of depression (Forney, 126). Such a quote is accompanied by an intensely colorful, chaotic illustration that wonderfully captures the roller-coaster of emotions typical for people with bipolarity.

Moreover, Forney employs visual metaphors and symbols to portray the intricacies of mental illness. For example, in one panel she draws a maze and writes beside it 'The labyrinth of my mind' (Forney, 19) making the confusion and difficulties involved with getting inside your head clear as day. These visual materials provide readers with a fuller picture of life with mental illness and the myriad ways it can affect day-to-day reality.

The usage of the color red is among the book's most important symbolism. Forney used a range of red hues to illustrate the severity of the emotions linked to bipolar illness throughout the book. The color is vivid and overpowering during manic episodes, signifying the excitement and adrenaline surge. But during depressive episodes, the crimson becomes gloomy and oppressive, representing the weight and numbness of the illness. Forney skillfully conveys the extremes of bipolar disease and the emotional rollercoaster that goes along with it by utilizing this recurrent motif of red.

Forney's depiction of psychiatric problems in "*Marbles*" is made more nuanced and sophisticated by using images. Her paintings depict fractured memories, speeding thoughts, and warped perceptions—all aspects of the mind's inner workings. The "Treadmill of Despair," which illustrates the never-ending cycle of despair and the fight to escape its clutches, is one especially potent image. This powerful image effectively conveys the overwhelming severity of mental diseases and the grueling fight to overcome them. Another metaphor for the author's struggle with bipolar disease is found in the book's title, "*Marbles*." Forney recalls playing with and collecting marbles as a youngster; she uses them as a representation of stability and control. But as an adult, the marbles stand in for her battle to maintain her sanity in the face of her disorder's turmoil. A lone green marble on the book's cover symbolizes the only vestige of steadiness in a mind engulfed with psychiatric illnesses.



Forney's use of quotes throughout the novel adds depth and perspective to mental health. One of the most powerful quotes in the book is by poet and author William Styron, which reads, 'Depression is a disorder of mood, so mysteriously painful and elusive in the way it becomes known to the self, to the medics, as well as to the suffering.' (Forney, 2018). This quote perfectly encapsulates the enigma of mental illness and the difficulty in understanding and managing it.

*"The Bad Doctor"*, Ian Williams's debut graphic novel, is a moving and potent tale about the complexity of the human mind and the reality of mental health. Williams provides a vivid and perceptive portrayal of the several psychological illnesses that afflict our society via the use of deep symbolism, well-selected colors and imagery, and skillfully written prose.

The protagonist of the tale, general practitioner Dr. Iwan James of a tiny Welsh village, is followed throughout the narrative. Dream sequences and flashbacks provide us with insights into Dr. James's inner thoughts as the narrative goes on. We witness the impact of his battles with mental illness on his interactions with clients, associates, and family members.

*'The Bad Doctor's'* use of symbols to describe various psychiatric diseases is one of its most remarkable features. Williams provides a greater understanding of these diseases and their effects on individuals by using a variety of metaphors. Dr. James's ongoing battle with anxiety, for example, is shown as a big, dark bird that hovers on his shoulder and weighs him down all the time. Anxiety's pervasive and overpowering quality is aptly depicted in this image.

The recurring picture of a whirling, black cloud that follows the characters throughout the book is another potent motif. The tremendous weight of despair and how it may devour a person's entire existence are symbolized by this cloud.

Williams effectively communicates the novel's underlying ideas through the use of colors and images in addition to symbolism. Red is a hue that is used to symbolize the intensity and erratic nature of emotions, especially in times of increased stress or anxiety. Throughout the book, the visual design also varies to suit the characters' changing emotional states. While softer hues and finer lines are employed during times of peace and clarity, sharp, jagged lines and dark tones are used during turbulent situations.

Williams' work also demonstrates his in-depth knowledge of psychiatric problems and how they affect people. In addition to effectively depicting the signs and behaviors of different diseases, he also explores their underlying causes, which include social pressure and early trauma. This gives the people and their tribulations greater nuance and complexity, which increases their relatability and humanity.



One particular quote by the author that stands out is, 'I prefer the term 'psychological distress' to 'mental illness.' It better reflects the often-temporary nature of our troubled minds.' (Williams, 106). This passage demonstrates the author's multifaceted perspective on the topic of mental health. He is aware that there is a continuum rather than a fixed state of mental health and that people might experience fluctuating levels of mental wellness.

The problem of stigmatization of people with mental illnesses is also covered in the book. Williams highlights the stereotypes and discrimination that people with mental illness encounter, including in the medical community, through the character of Dr. James, who is a patient as well as a doctor. This is a potent reminder of how important it is to show compassion and understanding for people who are dealing with mental health problems.

### **Impact of Visual Storytelling on Reader's Understanding and Empathy:**

Since ancient times, visual storytelling has been a potent technique for expressing a variety of feelings and concepts. It has the power to evoke empathy and compassion in viewers, allowing them to identify with the characters and their journey. With the popularity of graphic novels growing in recent years, the influence of visual storytelling has increased significantly. One such graphic novel is Ian Williams' "*The Bad Doctor*," which has won praise from critics for its honest and moving depiction of a general practitioner's battle with alcoholism and despair. This essay will examine how reader comprehension and empathy are affected by visual narrative, with a particular emphasis on "*The Bad Doctor*."

The special capacity of visual storytelling is to activate the mind's logical and emotional centers. Prof. Elizabeth A. Martin is a visual communication specialist who states that 'Visual storytelling can convey complex ideas and messages that words alone cannot.' (Martin, 16). This is particularly clear in "*The Bad Doctor*," where the words and pictures combine to give the reader a visceral and powerful experience. The reader can empathize with the characters better because of the usage of pictures, which provide a deeper knowledge of their feelings and challenges.

Panel arrangement and composition are two other ways that "*The Bad Doctor*" skillfully uses images to evoke feelings. When queried how he approaches panel composition, Williams said in an interview, "I try to make the panel layout reflect the emotions and mindset of the character in that moment." (Credits Beat) The book makes this clear by having panels that change in size and form to reflect the characters' emotional states. For instance, the panels get narrower and more confined when the main character, Dr. Iwan James, is experiencing overwhelming and suffocating feelings, providing the reader with a window into his mental condition.

The use of symbols and metaphors is another part of visual storytelling that improves the reader's comprehension and empathy. In *'The Bad Doctor,'* Williams depicts James' sadness with a recurrent picture of a black dog. This straightforward yet effective metaphor helps the reader to feel the weight of James' suffering and relate to it on a personal level. 'The black dog metaphor originated from Winston Churchill's struggle with depression, and I wanted to use it as a way to convey the universality of mental illness.' (The New York Times) Williams said in an interview. This is an excellent illustration of how visual storytelling can transcend words and have a profound and lasting influence on the reader.

One of the most powerful effects of visual storytelling is the potential to elicit empathy in the audience. We are inherently drawn to pictures as humans, and when paired with a captivating narrative, they may elicit a powerful emotional reaction. *'The Bad Doctor,'* for example, transports the reader through the ups and downs of James' fight with melancholy and alcoholism. The utilization of pictures helps the reader to put themselves in James' position and feel his difficulties firsthand. In an interview, Williams states, 'I wanted to make the reader see the inner turmoil of someone who seems to have it all together on the outside.' (The Guardian) This technique of storytelling instills in the reader a strong sense of empathy, making them feel linked to the characters and their hardships.

The application of the visual story form in *'Marbles'* aids reader comprehension and sympathy for mentally ill people. In the graphic novel format, readers not only read but see and experience what the author experiences. As Forney explains, 'The pictures convey a feeling that words alone can't...I really wanted to show bipolar disorder' (Meyers).

*'Marbles'* is a powerful instrument to break the stigma of mental illness through its combination of words and images. In her struggles, Forney's use of humor breaks down the social stigma attached to mental health. As she says, 'We need to get our heads around this. The absence of mental illness does not equal happiness' (Forney, 28). This message also touches its readers, making them able to identify with the author's experience. In sum, *'Marbles'* is a moving and very graphic portrayal of mental illness. This use of color, symbols, and metaphors is very effective in relaying the complicated nature of psychological disorders. One can't help feeling a deeper understanding as well as empathy for those who suffer under such conditions. As journalist Robin Meyers states, 'With *Marbles*, Forney has pulled off a tricky psychological feat: creating a memoir that describes her varied mood states objectively but also shows what it is like to live in a mind at war with itself' (Meyers). *Marbles'* reminds us that mental illness is a many-sided and difficult fact of life for

some, asking readers to be more understanding.' *Marbles* combines words and images to create a powerful way of demystifying mental illness. Despite her dark moments, Forney's humorous nature eases the social prejudices against mental illness. "We just have to think about it. The lack of mental illness isn't the same as happiness. (Forney, 39). This is the kind of message that connects with readers, allowing them to feel for others in something they have experienced.

### **Conclusion**

In recent years, there has been a surge in interest in using graphic medicine to investigate and better understand mental health disorders. Graphic medicine offers the unique potential to express complicated and sometimes stigmatized issues in a more familiar and accessible manner by combining visual and narrative components. Through the investigation of two graphic novels, "*Marbles*" and "*The Bad Doctor*," we went into the field of graphic medicine and its potential in investigating psychiatric problems in this research article.

We identified how graphic medicine may give a greater knowledge of mental health difficulties through our examination of "*Marbles*" by Ellen Forney and "*The Bad Doctor*" by Ian Williams. Both of these graphic books investigate the lived experiences of people suffering from psychiatric diseases such as bipolar disorder and depression. The writers can successfully communicate the nuances of mental diseases by employing visual storytelling, from the inner turbulence and chaos to the exterior effects on relationships and daily life.

Furthermore, our research has demonstrated the ability of graphic medicine to foster empathy and compassion for those suffering from mental illnesses. Readers can go past the diagnosis and comprehend the person behind it by presenting a visual picture of these conditions. This can aid in the dismantling of preconceptions and the promotion of a more compassionate and inclusive society. It should be noted, however, that graphic medicine is not a substitute for established types of therapy or treatment for mental health conditions. Rather, it should be viewed as a supplement to the greater discussion on mental health. Graphic medicine can serve as a beginning point for talks and can assist in promoting awareness and understanding of these concerns, but it should not be used in place of professional aid.

In conclusion, our research suggests that graphic medicine has the potential to investigate psychological illnesses and provide a better knowledge of mental health. We've seen how the mix of visual and narrative components in "*Marbles*" and "*The Bad Doctor*" can express complicated and stigmatized issues in a realistic and accessible way. As we continue to investigate the convergence of graphic medicine

and mental health, it is clear that this medium has the potential to make society more empathic and understanding of persons suffering from mental health illnesses.

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