

CHAPTER THREE

Selfhood and trauma in Lynda Barry's "autobifictionalography"

Stepping from the insular boys' club of Crumb, Sim et al., the transition to Lynda Barry and Julie Doucet seems particularly refreshing. However, as I turn to discuss the comics of two women I must inevitably face the question of why, of eight comics creators, I am discussing only two women. If there are really so few women writing alternative comics, it is worth considering why that might be.

As Roger Sabin points out, there are three distinct but related problems – the representation of women in comics, women as readers, and women as creators working in the comics industry.¹ Predictably, few women choose to investigate an art form that has traditionally been used to produce male-orientated, if not downright misogynistic material. Nevertheless, as my chapters on Crumb and Sim have shown, the predominance of male authors, artists, readers and themes is not as straightforward as one might imagine. Trina Robbins has done a great deal to promote women cartoonists and comics aimed at a female readership. Her books *A Century of Women Cartoonists* (1993), *From Girls to Grrrlz* (1999) and *The Great Women Cartoonists* (2001) remain more or less the only sustained examination of comics by or for women. Robbins explains that for much of the twentieth century, comics were aimed at girls as much as boys: in their heyday in the 1940s, *Archie* comics, for example, sold to children and teens of both genders and spawned dozens of spin-offs and imitators. Admittedly, most were written by men, and from a twenty-first century perspective, the versions of femininity promoted by *Archie's* successors were often highly suspect, but nevertheless these comics sought to engage with what they perceived to be themes of interest to girls and women.² However, these comics declined in popularity throughout the latter half of the twentieth century.

The comics industry changed a great deal as the underground and then the new independent and alternative publishers developed throughout the 1970s and 80s, but the predominance of male creators, which was no surprise in the 1940s, began to seem increasingly anachronistic. Beth Bailey writes that in the first phase

1 Sabin (1993) 221.

2 Trina Robbins, *From Girls to Grrrlz: A History of [Female] Comics from Teens to Zines* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1999) ch. 1.

of the counterculture, representations of sex and the female body were often thoroughly anti-feminist, but that women were initially reluctant to challenge these for fear that the alternative was a return to the previous status quo in which sexuality was not discussed at all.³ However, it is clear from Robbins' account that some women did challenge the dominant representations of women, and experienced exclusion because of this:

Sadly, most of the male underground cartoonists understood as little about the new women's movement as the newspapers did, and reacted to what they perceived as a threat by drawing comix filled with graphic violence directed mostly at women. People – especially women people – who criticized this misogyny were not especially welcome in this alternative version of the old boys' club, and were not invited into the comix being produced.⁴

Although I have argued that Crumb's representations of violence against women are not straightforwardly misogynistic, and Sim's extravagant anti-feminism can hardly be considered representative, nevertheless my chapters on these creators suggest that there is some truth in Robbins' claim. Until very recently the situation has been slow to improve, partly because women writers and artists are frequently drawn to gendered topics. As Robbins points out, these women have often found themselves in an impossible dilemma: if they band together and support each other they risk becoming ghettoized, their work categorised as "women's comics", but if they attempt to compete in a male-dominated field their subject matter often leads to their exclusion.⁵

The fact that selfhood has become such a prominent topic has compounded the problem. The trend that Crumb started in the late 1960s has proved endlessly popular, and for nearly forty years, alternative comics writers have devoted a lot of energy to talking about themselves – their neuroses, identity crises, sexual fantasies, relationship problems and general sense of alienation from the mainstream of western culture. Autobiography, or semi-autobiography, has become one of alternative comics' central themes, and as many titles demonstrate, the medium proved ideal for representing the fractured, decentered qualities of late-twentieth-

3 Beth Bailey, "Sex as a Weapon: Underground Comix and the Paradox of Liberation", in Peter Braunstein and Michael William Doyle, eds. *Imagine Nation: The American Counterculture of the 1960s and 1970s* (London: Routledge, 2001), 305-324.

4 Robbins (1999) 85.

5 Robbins (1999) 118.

century experience. Writers like Harvey Pekar, Chester Brown, Joe Matt, Marjane Satrapi, Chris Ware and Craig Thompson have stretched the boundaries of the form in their attempts to narrate their own unstable and confusing lives and memories. However, much as I reject Scott McCloud's idea that comics readers identify with comics protagonists more intensely than consumers of other textual or visual media, it would be pointless to deny that readers of all media often privilege writers whose problems and perspectives, fantasies and ideals they recognise. As long as selfhood is the main topic of conversation, the distinction between "male" and "female" comics remains hard to erase.

I have so far said relatively little about the retail environment in which comics are sold, but it has had a significant impact on the appeal of comics to female readers. When Crumb was buying *Walt Disney's Comics and Stories* as a child, these titles were distributed on newsstands alongside other periodicals. Underground comics, on the other hand, tended to be distributed via "head shops", where they were sold alongside posters, dope-smoking paraphernalia and other counterculture-related products. Throughout the 1970s, as the underground press developed into alternative and independent publishers like Fantagraphics, Black Eye Press and Top Shelf, comics gradually moved into specialist comics shops. These specialist shops generally sold both mainstream and alternative comics, supporting innovative work alongside the traditional superhero material. These shops gave comics a home as the newsstand market dried up and the head shops closed down, but they also had the effect of insulating the market. As comics were segregated from other products, consumers were no longer likely to pick up a comic book while shopping for something else, and soon comics became the preserve of a largely male fan culture.⁶ The isolation of the comics market from both periodical and mainstream trade publishing worked against women comics writers. Once the retail environment had been polarised in favour of male readers, it became almost impossible for women to break back in: comic book shops were places in which women seldom felt comfortable, so those readers who might be inclined to buy a title like *The Amazing 'True' Story of a Teenage Single Mom* would never come into

6 Parts of this argument were first published in Emma Tinker, "Manuscript in Print: The Materiality of Alternative Comics", *Blackwell Literature Compass* 4.4 (July 2007) 1169-1182. On the direct market, see Bradford W. Wright, *Comic Book Nation: The Transformation of Youth Culture in America* (Baltimore and London: John Hopkins University Press, 2001) 260-2, and Pustz (1999).

contact with the product.⁷ Pustz notes that women who might be interested in comics are often deterred from spending time in comics shops by the prevalence of “posters featuring women with unbelievable amounts of cleavage” and “the gazes of male patrons who are surprised to see women in that setting”.⁸ Only very recently have book-length comics (under the guise of the graphic novel) begun to make their way into mainstream bookshops, and suddenly notable women writers like Marjane Satrapi are doing exceptionally well.⁹

Unlike Julie Doucet, Marjane Satrapi and many younger female cartoonists, Lynda Barry does identify herself as a feminist, and the development of female identity is the central preoccupation of her work.¹⁰ In discussing the role of humour in her comics, she emphasises its power to effect social change by drawing attention to attitudes that people, and particularly women, unthinkingly internalise:

I think that humor can actually change your point of view because it shows you the dumb girl in you and the smart girl in you. It divides it out, and when you laugh, you have this really sweet moment where you decide what you want to take back in. If you can laugh at an intelligent woman with a college degree obsessed with her body, wishing she had big tits or convinced that no one will love her because she has five stretch marks on her left thigh, then you can begin to change the way you see things.¹¹

Barry goes on to speak of Roseanne Barr’s humour as tremendously empowering for women because “when I see [it] I see how the system works”. For her, comedy is a way of highlighting injustice, and one that is all the more potent by virtue of its unthreatening façade. Nevertheless, and perhaps disappointingly for those like Robbins who would like to promote a tradition of women cartoonists supporting and influencing one another, neither Barry nor Doucet makes any reference to the feminist comics of the 1970s like *Wimmin’s Comix* (1970-91) and *Tits ‘n’ Clits* (1975-) in spite of their shared commitment to autobiography and feminine subjectivity.

7 Katherine Arnoldi, *The Amazing “True” Story of a Teenage Single Mom* (New York: Hyperion, 1998).

8 Pustz (1999) 8.

9 As Paul Gravett notes, the popularity of manga amongst young girls has recently begun to alter the gender imbalance of comics reading. See Gravett, *Manga: Sixty Years of Japanese Comics* (London: Lawrence King, 2004) 155-6.

10 See, for example, Mary Hambly, “An Interview with Lynda Barry”. *Backbone 4: Humor by Northwest Women* (Seattle: Seal Press, 1982). This, and many other interviews with Barry are archived at *Marlys Magazine* <<http://www.marlysmagazine.com/interviews/hambly.htm>>

11 Rosemary Graham, “Dividing Them from Us Within Ourselves: A Conversation with Lynda Barry”. *Iris: A Journal about Women* 20 (Fall / Winter 1988). <<http://www.marlysmagazine.com>>

Barry acknowledges a wide range of sources from Dr Seuss and Mrs Piggles-Wiggle to *Mad* cartoonist Dave Berg and Pop artist Peter Max. Most significantly, for all Crumb's apparent hostility to women, both Barry and Doucet cite him as an influence, and both acknowledge themselves to be part of a comics tradition that began with the underground.¹² This paradox is understandable and certainly nothing new: one can admire and emulate the art of one's predecessors without absorbing their politics. Both Barry and Doucet absorb Crumb's influence but frame their own representations of selfhood in very different ways from the male artists of the 60s and 70s. As the following two chapters will demonstrate, Barry and Doucet, like many alternative women comics writers from the 1970s to the present day, acknowledge a considerable debt to the innovations of the underground, not least in their determination that apparently low-brow, subversive humour and bizarre, ugly or explicit drawings can be powerful tools for social change.

If Lynda Barry is not a universally recognised name amongst comics readers, this is partly because she arrived in the alternative comics world from an unusual direction. Although her work has been published in underground anthologies such as Spiegelman and Mouly's *Raw*, Lynda Barry is primarily a self-syndicated cartoonist: that is, her books are collections of material originally published in the form of short newspaper and magazine strips.¹³ This has not only had a significant effect on the narrative structure of her comics, but it has also affected the demographics of her audience.¹⁴

Newspaper and magazine cartoons have a history all their own and are not generally discussed alongside book-length comics or anthologies of short stories. For a start, their development has followed a trajectory different from that of comic books. Comic strips have existed as a part of newspapers for longer than individual comic books, and have suffered none of the comic book's troubles in gaining social acceptance and respectability. When Frederic Wertham produced *Seduction of the*

12 See Joe Garden, interview with Lynda Barry. *The Onion A.V. Club*. 8th December 1999 <<http://www.avclub.com/content/node/24257>>; [Richard Wang et al.] "Lynda Barry, Funk Queen USA" *Blair* 5 [January 1998] <<http://www.blairmag.com/blair5/lynda/lynda14.html>> and Andrew Dagalil, "Julie Doucet's Secretions". Interview. *The Comics Journal* 141 (April 1999) 100.

13 *Raw* 2.3. (1991).

14 Teresa M. Tensuan discusses the cultural importance of newspapers as the context in which Barry's work would first have been read. See Teresa M. Tensuan, "Comic Visions and Revisions in the Work of Lynda Barry and Marjane Satrapi" *MFS* 52.4 (Winter 2006) 947-64.

Innocent, his polemical critique of mid-twentieth-century comic books, he was at pains to point out that he had no problem with comic *strips*, which, he said, were subject to stringent censorship and not aimed at a child readership.¹⁵ Furthermore, as Trina Robbins notes, newspaper strip cartoonists can expect a reasonable proportion of their readers to be women, unlike the authors and artists of most comic books in the 1970s and 80s.¹⁶ Nevertheless, the relationship between comics and their newspaper hosts altered considerably throughout the twentieth century. The days when a comic strip might have a significant impact on the success or failure of a newspaper are well in the past. (In 1896, for example, Richard Outcault's *The Yellow Kid* played a key role in the success of William Randolph Hearst's *New York Journal*.)¹⁷ Throughout the early twentieth century, newspaper comics artists were often allocated entire pages, and were free to develop narratives that demanded an attentive continuous readership. New writers and artists could often find a way into the business with small local newspapers, and unusual strips could potentially develop a small but loyal following. Over the last fifty years, however, the space that newspapers have been prepared to devote to cartoons has shrunk considerably, and the demands on format have become increasingly restrictive. With a few rare exceptions (Posy Simmonds in *The Guardian*, for example) artists can no longer get away with elaborate, non-standard layouts, and full-page comics in newspapers and magazines are now uncommon. Increasing syndication of comic strips has led to the same material being reprinted in hundreds or even thousands of papers, with the result that big names dominate the market, and openings for new artists are difficult to find. Syndication has also arguably affected the range of subject matter acceptable, and it is now difficult for cartoonists to experiment or deal with controversial material in their work.¹⁸ Brian Walker notes, for example, that Gary Trudeau has repeatedly been censored for making political comments, as well as for "introducing a gay character, showing an unmarried couple in bed, and calling the president's son a "pothead"". ¹⁹

15 Frederic Wertham, *The Seduction of the Innocent* (London: Museum Press, 1995) 14.

16 Trina Robbins, *The Great Women Cartoonists* (New York: Watson-Guption, 2001) 140.

17 For further details of Outcault's relationship with *The New York Journal* and *The New York World* see Brian Walker, *The Comics before 1945*. (New York: Abrams, 2004) 21. This, and its companion volume *The Comics since 1945* (New York: Abrams, 2002) offer the best introduction to the field of newspaper comics, and form the basis for much of the following summary.

18 Bill Watterson discusses the influence of syndication upon cartoonists' careers in his introduction to *The Calvin and Hobbes Tenth Anniversary Book* (London: Warner Books, 1995).

19 Walker (2002) 65.

In addition to the differences in publication format which in turn produce marked differences in the audience and their expectations, it is important to note that a story designed to be read in short segments cannot afford to retain the structure of a longer comic book. A three or four-panel strip requires skills very different from those used by graphic novelists: even if it can overcome the need for a daily gag, such a strip must make sense to readers who have missed a section of narrative, it cannot have long sections in which nothing much happens, it must not contain so many characters that readers forget who is who, and so on. As syndicated strips are often printed out of sequence, it has become increasingly difficult for an artist to sustain a complex, continuous storyline. Unlike a novel or even a longer comic book, the plot of a comic strip is never exactly *going* anywhere – it is necessarily open-ended, the exact opposite of a genre like the *Bildungsroman* in which character progression is the main point. In this respect comic strips most closely resemble TV series in which each episode reaches a limited closure whilst characters, setting and major story arcs are carried from one episode to the next. In their analysis of television serial narratives, Allrath, Gymnich and Surkamp describe a sliding scale between the serial, like *Eastenders*, in which there is almost no closure within a single episode, and the series, like *The Simpsons*, in which each episode is complete and can be understood in isolation.²⁰ Modern serial comic books, like those within the Marvel universe, or indeed like *Cerebus*, are closer to the soap-opera end of the scale, demanding a continuous readership with a fairly high level of background knowledge to understand each episode, whereas daily or weekly newspaper and magazine strips must be reasonably coherent in isolation. Throughout the twentieth century the demand for self-contained, gag-based cartoons over continuous, serial strips increased dramatically, and the pressure on writers to produce strips that can be read in any order is now intense. In television, changes to the microcosm of a series are generally introduced slowly, but relative temporal stasis is easy to achieve in a comic. Partly thanks to the convenience of not having human actors to worry about, most strips adhere to the convention that characters do not age even if a strip runs for decades.²¹ Together, these factors contrive to produce a narrative form quite unlike any other, and it is essential in an

20 See the introduction to Gaby Allrath and Marion Gymnich (eds), *Narrative Strategies in Television Series* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005).

21 Such rules are made to be broken. The characters in Frank King's *Gasoline Alley* (1918-), for example, age at a relatively normal rate.

analysis of Barry's comics to pay close attention to their original publication format and the effect that this has had on her narrative.

Barry started drawing cartoons while at Evergreen State University in the late 1970s, and was first published by her friend Matt Groening, editor of the college newspaper and subsequent creator of *The Simpsons*. In 1979 *The Chicago Reader* agreed to publish her strip *Ernie Pook's Comeek*, offering what she perceived as a generous salary of \$80 a week, and she claims it was at this point that she decided to become a professional cartoonist.²² Following her successful publication in *The Seattle Sun*, Barry syndicated her own work, sending photocopies to other alternative weeklies.²³ For much of the 1980s she had a regular full page strip in *Esquire* magazine, and in recent years Barry's cartoons have been published in the online magazine *Salon*. Many of her strips have been reprinted in collections published by Real Comet Press, Harper Collins and Sasquatch Books. In addition to these collected editions of her comics, Barry has published two illustrated novels, *The Good Times Are Killing Me* (1988) and *Cruddy* (1999).

Many critics have discussed Barry's engagement with ethnicity, and I want to outline their arguments briefly before focusing on what I consider to be the more important themes of youth and gender in her work. In general, in view of the prevalence of issues surrounding the identity of troubled and marginalised individuals in comics, it is surprising that one so rarely encounters treatments of race. The Anglophone comic book world is dominated almost entirely by white writers and artists, notwithstanding the efforts of publishers like Milestone to produce superhero narratives for African American readers.²⁴ In terms of racial heritage, Lynda Barry exists in a curious, liminal space. She has pale skin and red hair and seems, by all appearances, to be a "white middle-aged old lady hippie", yet her mother is half Filipina and her white father has never been a major part of her life.²⁵ She grew up in a Filipina household with her mother and maternal grandmother, in

22 Garden (1999).

23 Personal letter. 20 October 2007.

24 See Jeffrey A. Brown, *Black Superheroes, Milestone Comics, and Their Fans* (Jackson, Mississippi: University Press of Mississippi, 2001). Fredrik Stromberg, *Black Images in the Comics: A Visual History* (Seattle: Fantagraphics, 2003) is also useful, although not aimed at an academic audience.

25 Melinda L. De Jesus, "Of Monsters and Mothers: Filipina American Identity and Maternal Legacies in Lynda J. Barry's *One Hundred Demons*." *Meridians: Feminism, Race, Transnationalism* 5.1 (2004) 7.

a bilingual Tagalog/English environment. The sense of a mismatch between outward physical appearance and personal ethnic identity is a particular preoccupation in *One Hundred Demons*. Melinda de Jesus' "Liminality and Mestiza Consciousness in Lynda Barry's *One Hundred Demons*" is an excellent, thorough analysis of ethnicity in Barry's work. In this essay de Jesus argues:

...the identity struggles Barry presents in *One Hundred Demons* must be regarded as contributing to the process of Filipina American representation and decolonization, rather than as just humorous depictions of ethnic American adolescent angst.²⁶

Crucially, she points out that Barry does not need to spell out her concern with racial identity because the visual nature of the comics form does much of the work for her: red-haired, white-skinned, freckled Lynda looks very different from other members of her family. Nevertheless, Barry noted in a 1999 interview:

...although there were racial conflicts on my street, certainly, they were nothing compared to the emotional ones... On the street where I lived, there were so many kinds of people in so many situations that it wasn't logical to group into a category as general as race.²⁷

It is tempting to emphasise Barry's concern with race simply because it would be nice to find some non-white people discussing their own identity in comics. However, it would be unwise to overstate the case. When de Jesus asks, Barry does claim to identify with "pinayist" perspectives, but also says that hers is "a weird way to be Filipina" and makes the apparently apolitical statement that "I'm basically a hermit who loves to draw pictures and write stories".²⁸ De Jesus notes that Marlys was originally conceived as a Filipina character, but the fact that this attribute dropped away in subsequent representations suggests that ethnicity is not as important to Barry as the problems associated with gender and youth.²⁹

One Hundred Demons is perhaps the only one of Barry's books to have received the critical attention it deserves, and it is easy to assume that she has written nothing else of note. The fact that this title has received more analysis than

26 Melinda de Jesus "Liminality and Mestiza Consciousness in Lynda Barry's *One Hundred Demons*." *Melus* 29.1 (2004) 228-9.

27 Pamela Grossman. "Barefoot on the Shag". Interview with Lynda Barry. *Salon*. 18th May 1999. <<http://www.salon.com/books/int/1999/05/18/barry/index.html>>

28 De Jesus, *Monsters* (2004) 7.

29 De Jesus, *Monsters* (2004) 22.

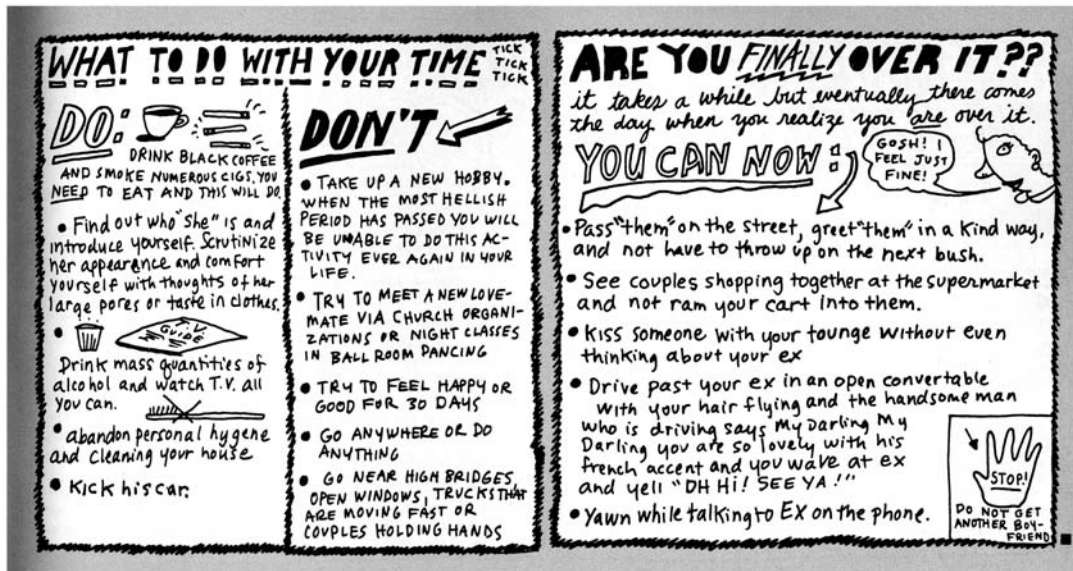


Figure 14.

all of Barry's other books put together is partly due to its awards (the Eisner Award for Best New Graphic Album, plus an Alex Award for books appealing to young adults) but also because it is an attractively garish book, the only one of Barry's to be printed in full colour.³⁰ I do not intend to go over ground already covered in excellent readings by Meisha Rosenberg, Ozge Samanci and Melinda de Jesus.³¹ However, I do want to place *One Hundred Demons* in the context of Barry's collected comic strips, because as I will argue, the structural differences between *One Hundred Demons* and Barry's short strips produce markedly different representations of traumatic experience. First, however, I wish to analyse the development of Barry's work from her early punk-influenced strips to the sustained examination of childhood and adolescent experience found in her later comics.

Barry's early 1980s strips, collected in *Girls and Boys* (1981), *Big Ideas* (1983) and *Everything in the World* (1986) deal primarily with adult relationships and exhibit a visual style notably different from her mature work. The comic strips collected in these books are primarily gag cartoons, often barely definable as narrative texts. They include strips like "Breaking Up: Your Guide to Painful Separation" (Figure 14), a viciously candid parody of women's magazine advice features, various meditations

30 At time of writing this is in the process of changing: Barry's full colour *What It Is*, published in May 2008 by Drawn and Quarterly, is intended to be the first of a series of seven books.

31 Ozge Samanci, "Lynda Barry's Humor: At the Juncture of Private and Public, Invitation and Dissemination, Childish and Professional" *IJOCA* 8.2 (Fall 2006): 181-199; Meisha Rosenberg, "The Demon's in the Detail: Lynda Barry's 100 Demons and the Multiple Frames of Feminist Comics." Paper presented at the Popular Culture Association Conference, San Diego, CA 2005.

on fear and power, and any number of educated, intelligent women inexplicably fawning over worthless men. Some strips mimic a narrative format but deliberately fail to go anywhere: “The Creation of the World” starts with nothing of note and ends with a sad, prosaic anticlimax: “Everything seemed dangerous then and nearly everyone had to work at a job they didn’t like all the time. But you probably know this next part by heart” (*Big Ideas*, 8-10). Significantly, the protagonists of these strips are not identifiable as individuals; they are generic young men and women in typical situations, and their stories do not require character continuity to make sense. These comics exhibit a distinct stylistic simplicity reminiscent of R. Crumb’s line-only phase, but more importantly, they exemplify the defiantly messy, handmade aesthetic of punk. Where the underground, for all its supposedly liberal hippy ideology, tended to exclude women, punk had more room for female musicians, writers and artists, although the subculture was still heavily male-dominated and women are seldom allocated much space in histories of punk.³² In discussing her time at college, Barry places herself in both camps, saying of Matt Groening, “he

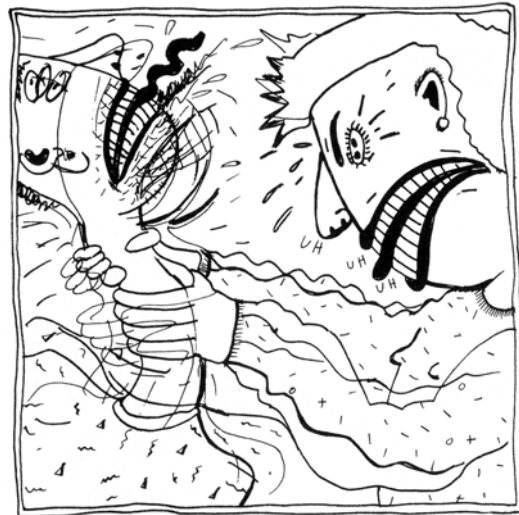


Figure 15.

was not a hippie or a punk and I was both of those things in my own lame way”.³³ Because “punk time for me was college”, she describes 1979 as “post-punk time”, although she rejects the term “new wave”.³⁴ The deliberate scruffiness of Barry’s comics later seems to reflect a commitment to the representation of childhood experience, but here in her early work it suggests a distinctly punk refusal of neatness and professionalism. Faces and figures are deliberately amateurish, noses seem stuck on as an afterthought, and particularly in representations of movement,

32 See Lauraine Leblanc, *Pretty in Punk: Girls’ Gender Resistance in a Boys’ Subculture* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1999).

33 Garden (1999). Barry’s perception of Groening’s non-punkiness may not be entirely accurate – Guy Lawley claims that Groening worked in a “pioneering” punk record shop in 1977 and had links with the punk scene in LA. See Guy Lawley, “I like Hate and I hate everything else”: The Influence of Punk on Comics” in Roger Sabin, ed. *Punk Rock: So What? – The Cultural Legacy of Punk* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999) 106.

34 Garden (1999).

lines are overdrawn almost to the point of abstraction (Figure 15) (*Girls and Boys*, 46). Most obviously, the covers of both *Girls and Boys* and *Big Ideas* feature characters with punk hairstyles, notably the “Poodle with a Mohawk” (an image which also appeared on a t-shirt).

In keeping with this defiantly punk style, Barry successfully ignores many of the conventions of professional cartooning. Several panels of “Breaking Up” are composed almost entirely of text, yet astonishingly, readers consent to see the whole strip as a comic (Figure 14) (*Big Ideas*, 69). Because Barry imitates the magazine feature format, producing a handwritten version of those carefully typeset lists of “dos and don’ts” that one might find in a boxout panel of an advice or lifestyle feature, the reader interprets the panel as a familiar form of graphic rather than as pure text. Recalling McCloud and Saraceni’s iconic/symbolic scale, one might note that Barry presents symbolic text in such a way that it reads as an icon. Although deliciously witty, “Breaking Up” describes a dark and cynical perspective on modern relationships, which range from openly abusive to vaguely disappointing, with a colourful spectrum of guilt, boredom and dissatisfaction in between.

Around the mid 1980s, Barry’s focus shifts towards children and teenagers. The section on “The World of Growing Up” in *Everything In The World*, in which the earliest strip is dated 1984, is both visually and thematically suggestive of her later work. Towards the late 1980s Barry gradually began to centre her comic strips on a specific family: Marlys, Maybonne and Freddie Mullen, and their cousins Arna and Arnold Arneson. The Mullens and Arnesons are both single parent families living in a lower class neighbourhood of an unspecified American suburb, although both families move around (the Mullens spend some time living in a trailer park) and both sets of children are occasionally sent to stay with relatives for reasons that their somewhat unstable mothers never explain. Maybonne is the eldest, with all the signs of emotional chaos that one might expect of a teenager; Arna is younger but sometimes surprisingly mature; Marlys is eight, and still very much a child. The boys tend to feature less prominently and their ages are harder to determine, but like Arna they generally seem to be between ten and twelve.

From *To Kill a Mockingbird* to the recent bestseller *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night Time*, the use of children as narrators of novels that comment on adult behaviour and values is nothing new. Likewise, the use of children as protagonists of newspaper strip cartoons is well established. However, most comic

strips which employ a child's perspective on adult events are engaged in a fairly light and superficial evaluation of adult values and practices. There is little hard-hitting satire or social critique in the average syndicated comic strip. This, perhaps, contributes to the prevailing assumption amongst non-comics readers that comics are kids' stuff (one reviewer of Spiegelman's *Maus* remarked "...*Maus* is not exactly a comic book, either; comics are for kids").³⁵ Most readers of Robert Crumb or Dave Sim would presumably recognise the unsuitability of such material for children, but the continuing dominance of this assumption may have something to do with the fact that many people's only contact with comics is through newspaper strips, which, if not exactly aimed at children, offer a distinctly anodyne vision of children's lives. The protagonists of, say, *Peanuts* or *Calvin and Hobbes* might express loneliness and perplexity at the workings of the adult world, but a reader can be reasonably sure that these characters are not going to be raped or beaten, exposed to homophobia, racism, alcoholism or mental illness. The microcosm in which they live allows the possibility of mild distress but these characters remain insulated from the worst horrors of the real world in a way that Barry's protagonists are not.

Many narratives about the lives of children are understandably preoccupied with the formation of adult identity, and many of the protagonists of Barry's strips are constantly, self-consciously trying to place and define themselves amongst their peers. To consider exactly how this works in Barry's comics, I want to examine two stories in which the narrators discuss the problematic and unstable formation of teen selfhood. In "How Things Turn Out", Arna explains the complexities of the school hierarchy (Figure 16) (*The Fun House*, n.pag). As in many of Barry's comics, the bulk of the narrative takes the form of first person narration rather than speech-balloon dialogue. Arna's commentary appears in captions which occupy more than half of each panel, and the accompanying images are fragments of an ongoing narrative illustrating differences in status between peers. Angela (labelled "top") refuses to have anything to do with Deena, at the bottom of the pile, whilst another nameless student apologises that she is forbidden from visiting a friend because "My mom says I'm not allowed to walk at where you guys live". Barry herself has spoken of the impact that social deprivation had on her upbringing. She describes the "culture shock" of going to rich friends' houses in junior high school, and says:

35 Elizabeth Hess, *The Village Voice* 14th January 1992. Cited in Joseph Witek, "Imagetext, or, Why Art Spiegelman Doesn't Draw Comics". *ImageText* 1.1 (Spring 2004).



Figure 16.

I tried to be like the richer kids as much as I could because I wanted to live on their streets, at least hang out on their streets and eat their amazing food and walk barefoot on their shag carpets. I became something of a pest in that way, and in general other people's parents didn't like me. I had a boyfriend whose mother was horrified by me and would correct my manners all the time. She was so happy when it was finally over.³⁶

Nevertheless, in the comics themselves one finds a marked distinction between class and peer group status. Arna notes that "money only mattered kinda", and the protagonists of Barry's comics are less concerned about wealth per se than their position in the school social order. In this hierarchy social class plays a part but so, for example, do large breasts, or a sophisticated taste in music (*Come Over*, 15; *Perfect Life*, 36). In "How Things Turn Out", Arna's mention of "the ones you would be ashamed to have to touch" inevitably refers the reader to the Indian Dalits, those outside the caste system who are often called "untouchables". In Arna's school, the American dream of being able to work one's way up from a position of low status barely exists even as an aspiration. The idea that a person of high status can be contaminated by contact with an untouchable is particularly sinister, as it produces a powerful disincentive to show compassion for the weak. In 1982, when

³⁶ Grossman (1999).



Figure 17.

Barry was still writing cartoons about adults, she told an interviewer that she was trying to draw attention to the power games of adolescence that “we like to think we have outgrown”, and which adults “don’t want to admit [happen] to them”.³⁷ By returning to the point at which these games develop she interrogates the formation of abusive and self-destructive behaviour in adulthood. Through her ingenuous narrator Barry defamiliarises adult mores, and stages a sharp critique of a social reality in which children unashamedly mimic and amplify the attitudes of their parents.

“Perfect” is narrated by Maybonne, and describes what in many ways is an even more frightening social environment (Figure 17) (*Perfect Life*, 24-5). For Maybonne, selfhood is a personal project which demands constant effort and improvement. In another strip, when Maybonne returns to her mother’s house and consequently her old school after staying with her grandmother, she resolves to take the opportunity to reinvent herself:

Mom says I don’t have to start my new school until Monday. That gives me five days

37 Mary Hamby, interview. *Backbone 4: Humor by Northwest Women*. (Berkeley, CA: Seal Press, 1982). Reproduced at <<http://www.marlysmagazine.com/interviews/hamby.htm>>

to experiment on my new personality: shy. Deep. Straight A's. And a British accent. (*It's So Magic*, 115).

"Perfect" demonstrates the futility of such efforts. Peering at herself in the mirror, Maybonne plaintively objects that "the new thing at my school is for you to be yourself", and asks, "but what do you do incase [sic] yourself really sucks?" She tries to use inspirational texts for support, but sadly reports the limits of their effectiveness: "I am trying to do that idea of the poem "You are a child of the universe" but sometimes it is so hard". Her sentence construction betrays part of the difficulty: she is trying to *do* an idea, to reconstruct herself and her feelings around a pseudo-spiritual concept. Maybonne's tearful lamentation that Doug is perfect for her is symptomatic of the mutability of her emotions: she only went with Doug in the first place to prove to her peers that she is not a lesbian, and she subsequently rejects him when he comes back and attempts to convert her to Christianity. In *Reviving Ophelia*, Mary Pipher described the immense cultural pressure on teenage girls in late-twentieth-century US culture whom she describes as being coerced into "worshipping the gods of thinness" and who "experience social pressure to put aside their authentic selves to display only a small portion of their gifts".³⁸ Like many girls, Maybonne finds herself saddled with the obligation to construct an identity for herself but struggles to do so in a culture that defines women by impossible standards of behaviour and physical perfection.

Both strips exhibit significant disjuncture between image and text. In "How Things Turn Out" there are two types of text, caption and speech, with the result that Barry effectively tells the same story twice, offering the reader two slightly different versions that corroborate each other's evidence. In terms of relative page space, the text dominates every panel, and the figures are squeezed in around Arna's commentary. "Perfect", on the other hand, contains no speech at all, and begins to move towards illustrated prose rather than comics narrative. The images in the first three panels could appear in more or less any order: indeed, their similarity is the point, as Maybonne's desperate wish for change remains unfulfilled and she inspects her reflection from different angles, trying to grasp how "being yourself" might work. Only in the final panel do we see a change: Maybonne's mirror-self

38 Mary Pipher, *Reviving Ophelia: Saving the Selves of Adolescent Girls* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1994) 22.

attempts to comfort her sobbing, real world counterpart. This demonstration of the shadow-self's independence enacts the fractured nature of Maybonne's subjectivity: she can contemplate actively working on her identity because she feels herself to be divided into a number of different, overlapping selves.

An altogether more disturbing kind of splitting takes place in *The Freddie Stories* (1999), in which the deeply troubled Freddie repeatedly finds himself fractured into different personae. Freddie first begins to experience hallucinations after his failure to report a planned arson attack leads to the death of an elderly woman. He is visited by a night monster of whom he says:

I do not control him, this fellow, this buddy, this pal. Not an imaginary friend. The very opposite of an imaginary friend. We were born together. (FS, 62).

When Glenn, who has been playing abusive "games" with Freddie, chokes to death on a peanut, Freddie attributes his death to this demonic "fellow". Freddie is subsequently hospitalised (sleeping in a damp basement protected him from his mother's anger at his compulsive behaviour but made him seriously ill), and says:

And in the hospital the doctors brought a person back alive who was not me. And he answered them. And I watched. And he did not know I existed. (FS, 79).

The real Freddie lies in a narrow, hammock-like space above his alternate self, entangled with curling thorny shoots that accompany him for several pages, a mark of the otherworldliness of his present state (Figure 18). Here, the form of Barry's comics seems to enact the division and exclusion that Freddie feels: the caption occupies well over half the panel, and Freddie in his thorny hammock is squeezed between the hospital room and the text. Only Marlys is not taken in by the fake Freddie. Crucially, it is only when he finds other doubles – first the Baba doll and then his new identity "El Fagastico" that he appears to regain some sense of wholeness. Freddie needs alternate selves

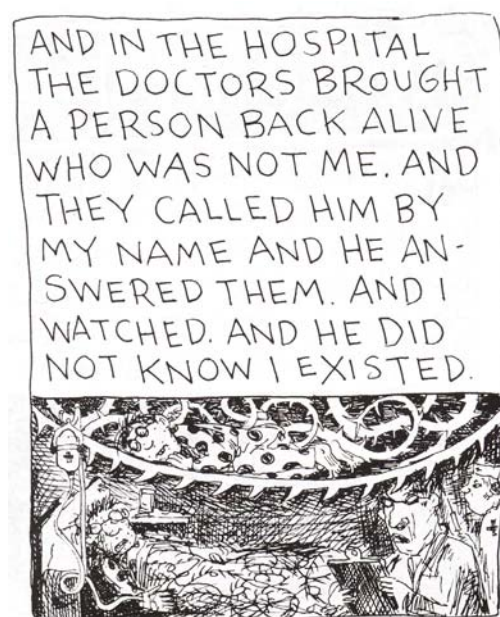


Figure 18.

in order to cope with his terrifying life: only by substituting the wilful strangeness of the Baba doll and El Fagastico can he begin to drive out the night monster and the fake Freddie.

In all these strips Barry's drawings retain elements of a childlike style that reflects their content. Although the popular view of comics as kids' lit is invariably grounded in erroneous assumptions based on the cultural association of comics with childhood, the argument that Barry's comics are deliberately childish is rather easier to substantiate. Throughout the 1980s her style develops from her early punk drawings to a softer, more measured kind of scruffiness, and gradually her deliberate rejection of a masculine, adult, professional aesthetic is accompanied by a commitment to the representation of children's experience. She consciously adopts a messy, childish technique, with scribbled lines, distorted limbs and wiggly panel edges. The title of each strip is written in an ornate, uneven script, highlighted with decorative borders and doodled flowers in a manner reminiscent of a teenager's diary (see figures 16 and 17). The untidiness of Barry's drawing reflects the haphazard, uncontrolled character of the lives she depicts. Her protagonists veer from one disastrous personal situation to another, and unlike the artificially cute drawings of children in many cartoons for adults, Barry's children are gawky and inelegant. The correspondence between style and narrative is effective but sometimes ambivalent. On the one hand, many of Barry's comics have a sweet



Figure 19.

and playful aesthetic that belies the serious and disturbing nature of their content. *One Hundred Demons* in particular is a brightly coloured, happy-looking book, suggesting all that is fun and frivolous about childhood and teenage life (Figure 19) (*OHD*, 62). In this respect it bears comparison with *Maus*, another text in which the narrative benefits from the disjuncture between its content and the reader's expectations based on style and medium. Yet at the same time, the clunkiness of Barry's drawings is spot-on: everyone, as Barry draws them, is ugly, fat, freckled and apparently uncomfortable in their own bodies. Mouths are big and clumsy, facial expressions are forced, limbs seem distorted and awkward. In "How Things Turn Out" Deena is small, gawky and awkward; in "Perfect" Maybonne's spotted face peers blankly at its shapeless reflection. Even people supposed to be beautiful in the context of the narrative come nowhere near to the comics stereotypes of beautiful people, and as a result the reader's sympathy remains with those who struggle with the belief that they are ugly. Perhaps most importantly, Barry's drawings of women and young girls deliberately resist any possibility of sexiness. Unlike mainstream, mostly male comics artists, who adhere to fairly strict conventions about the representation of women, Barry carefully avoids giving the reader any cute, provocatively dressed teenage girls to look at. It makes a substantial difference to the narrative: if these girls, who are so concerned about their appearance, were drawn as stereotypical cartoon eye-candy, the effect would be to trivialise their anxieties about the relationship between physical form and identity. Instead, by refusing to objectify their bodies, Barry focuses the reader's attention on the individuals themselves: her wavy, haphazard lines seem less to describe solid flesh than to mirror these girls' fragile conceptions of selfhood.

Barry's punky, DIY aesthetic also reflects a commitment to inclusiveness. At the end of *One Hundred Demons* comes an "Outro" in which she encourages readers to paint their own "demon" and offers practical advice on techniques and materials. By painting on lined legal paper and including photographs of herself slouched over a cluttered desk she demystifies the image of the artist and emphasises her "anyone can do it" stance. In addition to the "Come on! Don't you want to try it?" of its conclusion, *One Hundred Demons* is stylistically significant for its use of collage, a device that does not appear in any of Barry's black and white comics (Figure 19). Barry assembles a vast range of collected materials – pieces of printed fabric, cut out paper doilies, pressed flowers, glitter, scraps of torn and printed paper, photographs,

postage stamps and even origami insects. Her collage pages have a distinctly homemade, scrapbook feel, entirely unlike the consciously arty collages of Dave McKean, whose work I will discuss in chapter six. Meisha Rosenberg discusses Barry's collages in terms of Miriam Schapiro's concept of "femmage", which Schapiro defines as:

...work by women of history who sewed, pieced, hooked, cut, appliquéd, quilted, tatted, wrote, painted and combined materials using traditional women's techniques to achieve their art-activities... Femmage is also practiced by contemporary women who, like their ancestors, are clear about their womanly life and how it shapes their view of the world.³⁹

The practice of scavenging for discarded materials and re-using them in a creative process is, for Rosenberg, a positive, transformative process of "cutting, de-contextualising and layering of social and aesthetic constructions".⁴⁰ In Barry's hands, recycling and rearranging physical scraps of the past is a tool for controlling and defining that past, and ultimately for shaping one's own place in the present.

Having looked briefly at Barry's representation of childhood and adolescent identity in her short strips, I now want to turn to *One Hundred Demons*, and to read this book-length "autobifictionalography" alongside similar narratives of personal trauma that appear in her shorter strips (*OHD*, 4). Although many of Barry's comics contain a good deal of semi-autobiographical material, *One Hundred Demons* is more explicitly autobiographical than most, in spite of the author's ready admission that "parts of it are not true" (*OHD*, 7). The protagonist, Lynda, is clearly a version of the artist herself, who is shown as an adult in the introduction with black, flying demons telling her "this is pointless" and "what a waste of paper" (*OHD*, 11). In *One Hundred Demons* Barry sets out Lynda's childhood: a neglectful, emotionally abusive and occasionally violent mother; bullying and beating at school; poverty and social exclusion. Each chapter centres on a particular emotional "demon", and many of the episodes are linked by a preoccupation with loss. All these themes are familiar from her earlier work, but the difference here is one of perspective. As Barry looks back over thirty years, considering the effects of time and the nature of memory, the

39 Miriam Schapiro, "Femmage" in Katherine Hoffman, ed. *Collage: Critical Views* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Research Press, 1989). Cited in Rosenberg (2005).

40 Rosenberg (2005).

resulting narrative is dramatically different from her short-form treatments of similar topics.

As I noted above, the comic strip is a unique medium in terms of its structure and narrative conventions. The protagonists of Barry's short strips exist in a continuous present, facing both happiness and distress here and now but never having to deal with the effects of their experiences in the long term. Marlys, Maybonne and Freddie do not age significantly over the many years that their story has run, and in spite of many traumatic and potentially life-changing events that take place, they do not exhibit substantial developments in character. On a practical level, this means that most strips (apart from those in *The Freddie Stories*) can be reprinted out of sequence with relatively little disturbance to the narrative. None of Barry's collections adhere to the original publication sequence, and only rarely does the reader notice. (One notable exception is found in *The Fun House* (1987), in which NeeNee is involved in a car accident on page 33 but only moves into the neighbourhood on page 68). More importantly, this stasis means that characters neither learn from their mistakes nor have to cope with the ordeal of reliving them. Whilst Barry's stories of the Mullen children narrate traumatic incidents, they do not show the effects of that trauma six months or twenty years later.

This open-endedness and lack of clear narrative progression is arguably more realist than the artificial novelistic structure which is so often imposed on narratives of childhood. Richard Coe, for example, notes that the timescales of childhood autobiographies tend to be contracted because, he says:

...in the majority of cases the condensation in time reveals an attempt at a compromise between the retrospectively apprehended pattern of autobiography and the preconceived plot of the novel".⁴¹

One Hundred Demons is not, in this sense, novelistic; whilst it comprises a series of autobiographical incidents, its chapters do not lead on from one another in a necessary sequence. There is no single plot, but a series of episodes linked by the author's commentary. However, this commentary is of immense importance because it is this that transforms a series of detached incidents into an autobiography which exhibits the author's mature and distanced reflection upon

41 Richard N. Coe, *When the Grass Was Taller: Autobiography and the Experience of Childhood*. (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1984) 7.



Figure 20.

past events.

One Hundred Demons is disturbing not just because of the incidents themselves (“Hey there sweetheart. Do you and your dolly want to go for a ride?”) but because it demonstrates the extraordinary longevity of such events in the author’s memory (*OHD*, 72). Barry uses the seventeen-year lifecycle of cicadas as a metaphor for traumatic memories which remain undead, resurfacing ceaselessly (Figure 20). She writes of her friend’s suicide:

Some cicadas stay burrowed underground for 17 years. The world turns ‘round with them inside, alive in the blank darkness. Until the news reaches them. A telephone call. A scream. Come out, come out, wherever you are. // The “dog-days” cicada comes every year. They are singing as I write this. Invisible to my eye, filling this hour with sound. One year, 17 years, 30 years. I thought I would be over it by now. (*OHD*, 168)

The imagery, although perfectly restrained, is straight out of a horror film, from the nightmare of being buried alive and the synecdochal sentence fragments “A letter. A scream” to the creepily playful “Come out, come out, wherever you are”. Writing at a distance of thirty years, Barry is able to explore the terrifying complexity of buried memories as well as the process of burying them in the first place. She writes with anger of adults’ naïve belief in children’s “resilience”, describing the reality of such survival as “the ability to exist in pieces”, and explaining the intolerable paradox of “remembering not to remember”. This is shown in Figure 19, with a partially obscured photograph of Barry herself and the perfectly balanced “CAN’T remember,

can't FORGET". Barry's use of the comics medium and the deliberate childishness of her style enact part of the problem. The young Lynda of *One Hundred Demons* is unable either to remain a child or to grow up fully, and so is caught in an appalling cycle of self-destructive behaviour that offers a momentary feeling of "wholeness" (*OHD*, 70). Furthermore, the comic exhibits a curious double vision: we see the young Lynda but read the commentary of her adult self, and we are aware that the childlike images of the girl are drawn by the adult. The narrative alternates between the child Lynda and her adult self: in "Dogs", one of the later chapters, the commentary refers to Barry's current life but the images drift between childhood and adulthood. *One Hundred Demons* encapsulates the appalling tension of early trauma, the condition of being both present and absent, trapped in childhood and forced into adulthood.

It is important to note that it is not the book-length form *per se* that produces the distance in *One Hundred Demons* but the fact that in this book, the distance between text and image effectively produces a double protagonist, the adult-child Lynda. *One Hundred Demons* was published serially, on the website *Salon.com*, and it is possible to read many chapters out of sequence without losing the sense of the narrative. Nevertheless, the effect of reading the collection as a whole is very different from that of reading the strips in isolation: the focus shifts from the humorously described "demons" to their effect on Barry herself.

Barry's use of the comics form also strengthens her narrative of trauma through its necessary condensation of events. Several theorists have written of the problems inherent in representing trauma. Dori Laub argued that although the telling of one's story is an important mechanism for survival, yet "no amount of telling seems ever to do justice to that inner compulsion" because the state of "being inside the event" makes witnessing impossible.⁴² Cathy Caruth subsequently wrote:

The trauma... requires integration, both for the sake of testimony and for the sake of cure. But on the other hand, the transformation of the trauma into a narrative memory that allows the story to be verbalized and communicated, to be integrated into one's own, and others' knowledge of the past, may lose both the precision and the force that characterizes traumatic recall.

42 Dori Laub, "An Event Without a Witness: Truth, Testimony and Survival" in Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis and History* (New York and London: Routledge, 1992) 78, 81.



Figure 21.

Caruth goes on to suggest:

...beyond the loss of precision there is another, more profound disappearance: the loss, precisely, of the event's essential incomprehensibility, the force of its *affront to understanding*. It is this dilemma that underlies many survivors' reluctance to translate their experience into speech...⁴³

One could argue that writing and drawing a traumatic experience are two very different processes, but in fact Barry does not directly do either. Marlys' brother Freddie, her sister Arna, and Maybonne's friends Cindy Ludermeyer and Cheryl Holt are all sexually abused or assaulted, but at no point does the reader witness the event itself. Although Marlys is fortunate enough not to experience abuse, she witnesses the suffering of others and is sufficiently disturbed that she refuses to narrate it. In "If you want to know teenagers", she leaves the last panel blank with the comment "Sorry for no picture. I saw something I can't even draw it. Don't try to guess it. Just forget it." (*The Greatest of Marlys*, n.pag).

Unlike Debbie Drechsler or Phoebe Gloeckner, both of whom illustrate sexual assaults in horrifying detail, Barry avoids depicting the incident itself,

43 Cathy Caruth, *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (Baltimore and London: John Hopkins University Press, 1995) 153-4.

describing instead the effects of trauma on the victim's mental state.⁴⁴ In "Branded", for example, a younger child witnesses the aftermath of her older sister's rape (Figure 21). As readers we do not see the assault, nor even hear what happened from the victim herself; rather we are left with her sibling's observation of apparently unprovoked anger, the grass stains on her back, and a long period alone in the bathroom, "crying like she cried when our dog got killed". The victim's response is irrational and largely unconscious: she deflects her anger onto her family – "she said she hated me and everything and especially our mom and our dad and our house". To a reader this is clearly a displaced response to an event too traumatic and confusing to process, but to adult onlookers it simply makes no sense. The narrator reports their mother's unfeeling view that "once you're about 15 you turn to a stupid idiot and *that's* for sure", implying that such incomprehensible behaviour is not unusual in this fragile teenager. The episode is rendered unusually touching by the empathy of the helpless narrator and her effort to bring about another act of displacement: she deliberately smashes a glass and a plate to deflect their mother's anger onto herself.

One might well argue that Barry's refusal to represent sexual trauma is due partly to the limits of what a mainstream magazine will consider publishable: *discussing* sexual violence is one thing, *depicting* it rather different.⁴⁵ This inequality of censorship is too large and complex an issue to deal with here. However, I suggest that there is more to Barry's avoidance of graphic detail than simple evasion of censorship. In a conference presentation on Barry's illustrated novel *Cruddy*, Gene Kannenberg noted the narrator's tendency to talk around trauma, describing everything but the incident itself. Although *Cruddy* is not a comic, Kannenberg referred back to McCloud's disputed concept of "closure", and explained:

When discussing his concept of "closure" in reading the gaps between comics panels – what he labels "observing the parts but perceiving the whole" – McCloud asserts... "In an incomplete world we must depend on closure for our very survival" (63). It seems to me that in these cases, Roberta is doing exactly the opposite. The "gaps" in her reported narrative act as a sort of coping mechanism, allowing her temporarily to make peace, to come to terms with a reality which is in fact *far too connected* with

44 Debbie Drechsler's *Daddy's Girl* (Seattle: Fantagraphics, 1996) and Phoebe Gloeckner's *A Child's Life* (Berkeley, CA: Frog, 1998) are excellent, although extremely harrowing representations of sexual abuse and assault.

45 Even without visual depiction of sexual assault, Barry has said that such strips are more likely to be censored now than they were fifteen or twenty years ago. Personal letter, 20th October 2007.

her; it's only by leaving out the worst of her life that she's able, for a while, to endure it.⁴⁶

Kannenberg was describing Barry's prose, but this is also exactly what happens in her comics representations of trauma. These experiences go so far beyond the subjects' realms of familiar experience that they are, for them, unrepresentable in either language or image. What the reader sees, therefore, are not traumatic events but their consequences: young people crying, blaming themselves, wishing for death or developing severe behavioural problems.⁴⁷

In *One Hundred Demons* Barry writes of the "compulsion to repeat situations that harmed you", an observation that brings together two key issues in the study of trauma narratives: agency and memory (OHD, 71). In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* Freud noted that the repetition of unpleasant experiences in dreams and play could not be accounted for by simple wish-fulfilment as he had previously thought. He hypothesised that the patient may repeat traumatic experiences "because by thus being active he gains far more thorough-going control of the relevant powerful experience than was possible when he was merely its passive recipient".⁴⁸ Repetition may represent an effort to master and control a traumatic past, but as B. A. van der Kolk notes, "clinical experience has shown that this rarely happens; instead, repetition causes further suffering for the victims or for people in their surroundings".⁴⁹ Kolk adds that children are particularly prone to this repetition, and that many individuals are not consciously aware of a connection between their early experiences of trauma and later abuse, rape and mental health problems. Again and again Barry's comics explore the boundaries of consent, abuse and assault, as girls silently submit to unwanted sexual contact. When Arna reports on her experiences with Kenny Watford she says, "...and you would stand there pretending something else was happening, anything else". A terrified Arna is shown standing in shadow, shoulders hunched, eyes shut, frozen (*Down the Street*, 101). These teenagers are clearly victims but often do not resist their abusers, and cannot possibly go to the

46 Gene Kannenberg, "Expect the Unexpected; And Whenever Possible Be the Unexpected": Lynda Barry's *Cruddy*". Unpublished conference presentation. PCA conference 2006.

47 See, for example, *One Hundred Demons* 70-1 and *The Freddie Stories* 66-7.

48 Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle and Other Writings*, trans. John Reddick. (London: Penguin, 2003) (1920) 75.

49 Bessel A. van der Kolk, "The Compulsion to Repeat Trauma: Re-enactment, Revictimization and Masochism", *Psychiatric Clinics of North America* 12.2 (June 1989), 390-1.

police or even to their parents (Cindy Ludermeyer notes that her mother would be less sympathetic about her gang rape by Catholic schoolboys than angry that she was drunk and out at night in the first place) (*It's So Magic*, 68-9). Straightforward definitions of consent and refusal are meaningless: in legal terms these children are incapable of consent, but in practice they are at an age at which they are held responsible for their actions, including behaviours that both abusers and callous parents would denote as "asking for it". Arna's remark that she (and by implication others like her) would "sometimes" meet Kenny Watford in the woods implies that her experience is not a one-off; likewise Freddie's abuse in Glenn's cellar is ongoing, and only halted by Glenn's accidental death. The power of abuse is endlessly self-sustaining, as victims collude in repeating the very thing from which they most want to escape.

The compulsion to repeat trauma is hard to understand, but Barry moves towards an explanation when she describes her thirteen-year-old self "doing things that scared me but make me feel exhilaratingly whole" (*OHD*, 71). The idea of returning to the mental site of one's own trauma in search of this wholeness is of particular importance because for Barry, art itself can serve a similar function. She said of the singer Marilyn Manson:

Marilyn Manson reminds me of a part of the psyche that is usually up in the back corner of the basement or attic of a person but can need to get very expanded at certain times in order for things to feel in balance to someone who is feeling off-balance. For some people, being very spooky can give enormous relief, and digging on a really spooky scary artist can provide a kind of stable sensation. I tend to look at phenomena like M.M. or the Chuckie movies or even Freddie Kruger as balancing elements in a sort of soul physics.⁵⁰

That horror in art and literature can, for Barry, have a balancing or stabilising effect is further evinced by her references to the traditional violence of children's fiction which, she suggests, can paradoxically offer the most fertile possibilities for humanity and redemption. Following the publication of *Cruddy*, she repeatedly compared it to Grimm's *Hansel and Gretel*, suggesting that although such stories, if told as news items, would match any modern day tabloid for gruesome horror, they

50 [Wang et al.] (1998).



Figure 22.

can nevertheless serve as a counterbalance for the bleak cruelty of real life.⁵¹ Such displacement, she seems to suggest, can offer a way around the problem of directly facing one's own traumatic demons head-on.

I want to return briefly to the image of the cicada, because Barry's choice of an insect as the emblem of resurfacing trauma is no accident. She writes at length of head lice in *One Hundred Demons*, and insects also appear frequently in her shorter strips. Freddie, arguably the most vulnerable of the Mullen children, has a particular fondness for insects, giving them names and making them houses out of shoeboxes. He wins a science prize by trading swear words for insects that other children collect for him in jars (*Down the Street*, 98). When Marlys and Maybonne's mother decides that she wants them back, Maybonne's sceptical commentary is juxtaposed with Marlys' school project on termites (Figure 22) (*It's So Magic*, 106-7). In "You Are Leaving", Maybonne objects that "Me, Marlys and Freddy are supposed to just forget our lives at Grandmas [sic], just forget our friends, and our school, and kabam! Just go back to living with Mom". At the same time, Marlys explains that termites "live in

51 Garden (1999); Benny Shaboy, interview with Lynda Barry. *studioNOTES* 27 (November 1999 – January 2000) 4-6; Paige La Grone, "An Excellent Monster Maker When Monsters Are Called For". Interview with Lynda Barry. *Mean Magazine* 6 (1999)

wooden things a long time then the wooden thing falls over wrecked up. Then they move. Termite is not my first pick if I got to be an insect". It is hard not to detect a note of maternal resentment in Marlys' remark "The Queen she just lays there". Aware of the limited status that they have in the lives of the adults who control them, these children identify downwards, empathising with insects which are obliged, like the Mullens, to keep moving from one "wrecked up" home to another.

Marlys' identification with the homeless worker termites serving an indolent queen is representative of the familial relationships typically found in Barry's comics. As Melinda de Jesus points out, loving and supportive parents are conspicuously absent in the majority of Barry's strips, and mother/daughter relationships tend to be particularly problematic. In "Of Monsters and Mothers", de Jesus looks primarily at *One Hundred Demons*, and examines its mother/daughter relationships in terms of cultural estrangement of Asian-American women. She also reads Barry's mythical "aswang" as a demon of maternal estrangement which Barry has transformed into a source of creative energy. I do not wish to go over the same ground here, but I suggest that the uncertainty of maternal relationships is frequently offset by the strong bonds between siblings in Barry's comics. The children's identification with insects carries a sense of solidarity with another victimised underclass. In Barry's comics, as in many sympathetic representations of childhood, children are shown to be a minority voice, a marginalised social group. This device is of course a popular trope in children's literature (it is hard to imagine Roald Dahl or J.K.Rowling's books, for example, without protagonists who are constantly fighting a hostile, disbelieving or uncomprehending adult world). In Barry's comics this marginal stance is articulated not only in their fondness for bugs but in their support for each other and for persecuted adults. Stripped of the power dynamic of the parent-child relationship, friendships between brothers and sisters are volatile but often very supportive. Marlys and Maybonne yell at each other and express affection in more or less equal measure. When Maybonne is considering suicide, her main anxiety is for Marlys' wellbeing, and Marlys, in turn, glues the leaves onto a tree when Maybone says she will kill herself when the last one falls (*The Greatest of Marlys*, n.pag). Likewise these children empathise with marginalised adults: when Marlys' grandmother discovers that uncle John is gay and tells him not to come home again, Marlys runs barefoot down the road at 5am to say goodbye (*It's So Magic*, 46).

If the stories of Maybonne, Marlys, Freddie et al. were unremittingly negative,

the eternal present in which they seem to exist would be an appalling prison, a recurring nightmare with no promise of escape into adulthood. In fact, in spite of the traumatic events described above, many of the isolated moments described in Barry's comics are blissfully happy. Arna and Marlys hang upside-down from a T-shaped pole in the garden, saying it would be "totally worth it" if they cracked their skulls (*The Greatest of Marlys*, n.pag); the narrator of "A Funny Night" pretends to be asleep so he can enjoy being carried by his father (*Fun House*, 120); Maybonne manages to describe her year as "incredible" in spite of the fact that some parts "did make me about barf from sadness" (*Perfect Life*, 127), and all of them occasionally experience periods of great happiness in love. Furthermore, as will no doubt be apparent by now, their stories are often extremely funny. At the beginning of her career Barry said that "one of the reasons for humor with me is I need to be cheered up a lot".⁵² For her, humour is a coping mechanism, a way of dealing with all that is grim and heartbreaking in everyday life. With her economical prose captions and untidy drawings, Barry captures the voices of vulnerable teenagers with rare clarity, and the suffering she describes is offset by the wry wit of its narration. Although in Barry's comics even positive events are framed within a world in which suicide and rape are possible, it is a world in which absurdity is ridiculous as well as cruel. Her protagonists' brief moments of contentment experienced seem, to the reader, all the more precious for their dark counterbalance of sickening trauma.

52 Hambly (1982).