

MLA Podcast 007—Graphic Medicine and Comic Books

30:08

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

graphic, medicine, read, comics, graphic novels, people, comic, great, library, thinking, scoping, podcast, stories, grant, collection, talk, review, health

SPEAKERS

Sally Gore, Matthew Noe

Sally Gore 00:10

Welcome to this edition of Press, Play, Connect, the official podcast of the Medical Library Association. I'm Sally Gore, your host for this episode. I'm also the manager of research and scholarly communication services for the Lamar Soutter Library at the University of Massachusetts Medical School, and a member of MLA's Board of Directors. My guest today is Matthew Noe. Matthew is lead collection and knowledge management librarian for Countway Library at Harvard Medical School. Matthew and I have in common that we both spent some years of our lives in Kentucky. He still keeps a connection there, teaching at the School of Information at the University of Kentucky. Personally, Matthew, this heatwave that we're having in New England right now reminds me why I don't live in that part of the country anymore. But thank you for joining the podcast today. Some of our listeners may know that you have a great interest in and a devotion to graphic medicine and comics. And I'm so happy to you agreed to spend some time with me today to talk about this topic. So, to begin, why don't you just give us an overview of just what graphic medicine is, some of the ways it's used in practice, and why it's helpful.

Matthew Noe 01:18

Sure, thanks for having me today, Sally. And yeah, I'm with you about the heat. It's half the reason for finding a job out of Kentucky after grad school was to get away from this. It's awful. But speaking of grad school, you know, that's where I came across graphic medicine to begin with. And so one of the big ways it's used and thought about is - how I came across it, I was thinking about health literacy. It's like, so comics as a communication tool came up in my researching. Yeah. And so, I'm sorry, I'm getting backwards on my questions here... So what is graphic medicine? It's basically, you know, comics that are about healthcare. It's that simple. Our official academic definition is the intersection of the medium of comics and the discourse of healthcare. And so it's as broad as either comics or healthcare is defined for you. The comics question about how do you define what is and isn't a comic I call, like, the third rail kind of thing? [SG: Yeah.] I try to avoid touching that question. Because in comic studies, that's like a whole rabbit hole that you could just spend your whole career working on. [SG

Yeah.] And healthcare is ever broadening. So, for us, we originally we were talking about, you know, medicine, you know, physicians, doctors, writing stories, nurses, nursing stories. And then, there's all the other aspects of healthcare there too, like patient stories, what are patients going through; but now we're talking a lot about how, how does climate health fit in to this conversation? What comments about climate are there? Because I mean, it's good, you know, we're sitting in this unusual massive heat wave in Massachusetts. [SG: Yeah, yeah.] The built environment, the natural environment, climate, all of this is going to come together, and it impacts all of our health already. And it's just going to continue to grow. You know, here we're seeing the PSA's all over town for heat wave and stay out of the sun. [SG: definitely.] So thinking about tools for that in comics. Yeah, and, you know, some, some ways it's used in practice, I guess, is, as a patient, you know, a literacy and education tool. I primarily, have used it with medical students, as like an empathy building exercise. So, you read about patient experiences, and you try to understand where people are coming from, with experiences that you may not have. We talk a lot about burnout in medical education. So we have the students draw their own experiences. One of the, one of the big people in graphic medicine is Dr. Michael Green. He's at Penn State School of Medicine, College of Medicine, I'm not 100% sure what the go by. But for more than a decade now, he's been teaching a class on graphic medicine to fourth year med students. It's like a month-long elective kind of thing. And so they not only read comics, but they're asked to create their own comics about their experiences. And some emergent themes come out of that about burnout and the abuse that medical students face throughout their training. [SG: Yeah, yeah.] And he's done some analysis looking at it as like a form of hazing. And so, some of the stories that students are willing to tell in comics form, they weren't willing to give voice to out loud or in other other ways, [SG: like in writing, or in journal writing. Yeah, yeah.] It seemed it was easier for some of the students to express this through images. And part of why that might be we're thinking is that they can sort of hide a little better who is saying these things. [SG: Yeah, yeah.] Because there's a fear of retribution if you come forward.

Sally Gore 05:17

Right. Yeah. I can see, like, if you're, you know, required to do a journal or a log or something, that's you, everybody knows that your voice, but you could create, you know, a little character to be your, to be you, to be your persona and kind of communicate through that.

Matthew Noe 05:33

Yeah. Yeah. So that's, that's just a one fairly common, big example. There's all kinds of ways to use comics.

Sally Gore 05:40

Yeah, yeah. Yeah, you did talk a little, you just mentioned, and I - this is not my, an area that I know that much about, but I have read, you know, a little bit and in preparing for this read a little bit. And it's interesting that the discussion around: what's a graphic novel? what's a comic? what's, you know, and...? And I think, you know, being a total novice of it, I would just say, comics, despite the fact that it's so big and large, and really isn't a very, very good term to describe, you know, since it's so large, encompassing. But I can see people going well, you know, Bugs Bunny. No, that's just like, you know, that doesn't fit in this serious stuff. But, you know, or it's childish to read graphic novels. Like that whole kind of thing. Like I can see where people would go down that way.

Matthew Noe 06:30

Yeah, well, yeah. That's a constant uphill battle.

Sally Gore 06:33

Yeah. Which is not great. So you said you, you were in school, and you had an interest in health literacy, so that that was really your prompt. Did you enjoy comics or graphic literature growing up, before that?

Matthew Noe 06:50

Yeah, so let's is. [SG: Did you read graphic novels?] Did I read graphic novels? Yes and no. [SG: Yeah, yeah.] So, it's, uh, this is my wife Gabby's, like, favorite story ever. Because she gets to effectively claim that she's responsible for my career in this, in this area. [SG: Go Gabby...] So I started my grad degree in library science in 2014. She had gotten me really into reading comics in 2013. Like, I had not been a big comics fan, become a reader. Like, I knew, like my background, and this is, you know, I, I read manga as a teenager, in the sort of less than legal way that most of us as teenagers did. [SG: Yep.] Internet was our friend. And then I watched, you know, a lot of anime or like, cartoons, like the animated X Men series from the 90s is like my jam. But I never really read the source material for any of that stuff. The cartoons or the movies like, even in the late 90s, early 2000s, there were superhero movies everywhere. It wasn't the MCU, but they were all over. [SG: Right. Right.] And so I had that background. But I wasn't really reading comics so much until, you know, my wife, my now-wife introduced me to them. And so I was like, going all in. We were like buying comics every week. I was reading all the all the great, quote-unquote, great comics of the past and getting caught up, kind of. [SG: Yeah.] And so that was happening at the same time I started grad school and was taking my, my first sort of, like, intro to health sciences librarianship and some classes. Yeah. And thinking about health communication. And because I was trying to, I was a reference intern at UK Medical Center library at the time. And they were sort of like UMass's, they were sort of open to the public a little bit, too. [SG: Yeah.] So I wasn't just helping students, I was helping the public. I'm trying to figure out ways to talk to people [SG: Right] And then I'm going, I'm googling around with my mediocre search skills and come across graphic medicine.org. [SG: Wow, yeah.] Come to find out people are using comics for this. And it was like this perfect moment of serendipitous discovery. [SG: Isn't that great? I love it when that happens.] And it kind of goes from there. [SG: And yes.] It's been non-stop graphic medicine since.

Sally Gore 09:18

Yes, you really have. I mean. I, we didn't have the chance to work together in the library when you were there, but I, you know, watched your building the collection, and I was kind of following along, and it's just really a cool thing. Yeah. So, um, several years ago, when you, I think it started when you were at UMass, you started a lengthy project with some support from the Gold Foundation, Arnold Gold Foundation, that involved a scoping review of graphic medicine literature and the use of comics in health education. And, by the way, for our listeners, we'll put a link to the project in the description in the materials Matthew's made available online. And we'll have that in the description of the podcast, so you'll be able to go for some follow up. But tell us some of the highlights or tell us a little bit about that project and what you... It took you... that was years of your life.

Matthew Noe 10:11

That was years of my life, yeah. You see, yeah, that started at when I was at Lamar Souter. There were people at Lamar Souter interested in health humanities, there still are. I was talking with Gina, on Twitter the other day about, like, there's a there's a bigger Institute sort of, of health humanities happening there now. [SG: Yes, yeah.] Which is great. And so, um, I've got partnered up with a faculty member and working with Len Levine, who's my boss at Countway now as well. [SG: Yeah.] But so we we got together and applied for a grant to do a scoping review. It was part of this grant program called mapping the literature or mapping the landscape. And they were offering grants to do these kind of scoping and mapping and systematic reviews on topics in the health humanities. And so we applied and I was, like, I had already at the time been doing, it's, it stopped and, for the moment, I was doing these This Week in Graphic Medicine, [SG: right, I followed along with that.] And I was constantly finding, you know, current and past studies using comics in health settings. And I was like, so people are doing research on this, it's just not getting widely read or widely known about. And a lot of the studies are relatively small. And so, let's kind of investigate that a bit. And so we put this proposal together, did the whole put together a search strategy thing. Tried to go as wide as we could, because we purposely chose a scoping model, because I wasn't gonna do any sort of, like, statistical analysis, [SG: Right.] I wasn't looking to. like, do a Cochrane Review. I just, we just wanted to know what was out there. [SG: Right, right.] Which I'd already done.

Sally Gore 12:04

Which is very helpful in a practitioner sort of way, right? I mean, that's what you want. Yeah, yeah.

Matthew Noe 12:10

And so we started that and did the searches and then had more than 5000 individual results. And then, and then had to go through the process of looking at every title and abstract, de-duplicating all of those, and then narrowing it down. And then we had to do a full read of some, like, 500 of those, like, because we were talking about the definition of comics problem. [SG: Right.] It was a massive problem for this. [SG: Yeah, yes.] You know, when did something stopping an infographic and become a comic? When did something stop being a, like... do single panel cartoons count as a comic? And then we were getting, some of the nursing journals have had editorial cartoons in them for decades, apparently. [SG: Okay.] Did we include those in the results? Because that's an example of comics and healthcare. But they weren't explicitly educating anybody. So we like excluded them in the end. I've got this long list of the total of every instance of a comic that I could find whether it was relevant to the actual question or not.

Sally Gore 13:20

Wow! What are you gonna do with all that data?

Matthew Noe 13:26

Right now, it's just kind of sitting on a computer, in an EndNote library. But so we went through this whole process. And this all was happening while our faculty member took another position at another, like, in a more, in a less academic role. It was like a managing a department. Yeah, and another school in another state. Then Len moved to Countway. And then eventually, I moved to Countway. [SG: And then we had a pandemic.] Then we had a pandemic. Yeah, so we spent a lot of time on this and a lot of effort. And it was such a slow process. And, at the same time we were doing this, graphic medicine has

been surging. Like, we had done our initial search in 2017, I think. And so, by the time we had finally gotten through all of that, there's another like year and a half's worth of studies we could look at. [SG: Right.] And a journal would expect us to look at to publish it. [SG: exactly.] And at that point, it was down to basically just me and what free time I had to work on this. And that's not a recipe for success with a review study. [SG: Right.] So ultimately, like we, we sent a preliminary report to satisfy the grant requirements and everything. But then ultimately, we decided the best place to publish what we had been able to accomplish was on the graphic medicine website - because then it's open access, everyone can see it, and it didn't go through this standard typical peer review process and everything. But for me, that's not why I took this on. I'm not a tenure track person. I'm not looking for scholarly credentialing. I just want the information out there. [SG: Right. Right.] And, and so the hope is kind of that can serve a baseline starting point for future people, so they don't have to redo everything.

Sally Gore 15:22

Exactly. Exactly. Yeah. Which is kind of rolls into the next question that I had, you know, prepped you for, which was: so, if someone's interested in learning about graphic medicine, or maybe they want to start a collection in their own library... you've done you've done this tremendous amount of, you know, work for people, that can people can build on, and they can do... So, are there other resources? I'm gonna just say that your primary resource like that for you, but are there other places maybe people could look through or you would recommend?

Matthew Noe 16:05

Yeah, so that's a that's a great primary resource for scholarly approaches. Yeah. If you're, if you're looking to build a collection, you know, the graphic medicine website is also a great place to go. That's basically the constant answer. On a recent webinar I recorded with somebody, like every panelist just said over and over to go to the graphic medicine website. That was always our answer. Because it's kind of the hub for everything. [SG: Right, right.] But so there's that scoping review. We have an ever growing amount of book reviews on the website. Our current reviews editor, Kevin Wolf, has been, like, he writes amazing reviews himself. He's recruiting other people to write reviews. It's been growing and getting better and better. For a long time, there were only three of us working on the website. It was originally just two, and then I came along. But even with three of us, it was just, there's so much - so we had to add people. [SG: Yeah. That's a good list of people I was looking at.] Yeah. Yeah. There's, um, and then there's the graphic medicine podcast, our multimedia editor or resources editor - I don't recall what the title is - but Alice Jagers is another health sciences librarian. [SG: Yes. Yes]. She's managing that part of the project for us. And MK Czerwicz who was a cartoonist and a nurse, and you should read Taking Turns by her. It's about the, everyone should, but it's about her experiences as a nurse on the HIV AIDS care unit, 371, yeah, 371, during the height of the crisis. It was in Chicago. [SG: Yeah. Yeah.] And it's a, it's a great example for people who are like: but what are comics good for with health sciences? Because that she combines an oral history with her own experiences with other people's. like, life experiences in an extremely accessible form. And it's telling the story that was kind of lost. [SG: Right.] Like, like, a lot of those stories just disappeared overnight. So yeah. But so yeah, there's... and then we also, if you're, if you're looking to start a collection, the easiest place to start is Alice and I put together with another grant, this one from it was an ALA Carnegie Whitney grant, to create an annotated bibliography of quote-unquote, essential graphic medicine. It is basically 30 or 35 titles that you can just go buy these, you have the start of a collection.

Sally Gore 18:37

Wow. Is that on the graphicmedicine.org website? Okay, excellent. Yeah, we'll be sure to put links to all these things to make it easy for folks to follow up. Because I, I mentioned to just several people that I was going to interview you, and they were really excited. So, you know, it's a topic that is so interesting, and, and, you know, accessible, and again, like just, just really an effective form of communication that, that we haven't... You know, we think about medicine, and it's so stodgy, and then we talk a lot about you know, plain language and getting things that way. But it's a whole other way to, to, you know, communicate with folks that's very effective.

Matthew Noe 19:22

And, yeah, it's been really, like I came into this, like the exact right time. But it's been a really, it's been a lot of fun to watch grow. And fun is one of those things like: we're the medical library, we're quiet and dusty. [SG: Yeah. This isn't that at all. Right.] This is a chance to bring some fun into the, into the library and build that community space that we think of with public libraries, but make it a health sciences library thing, too.

Sally Gore 19:52

Yeah. I love it. I love it. So, um, you mentioned about climate change and, you know, kind of how graphic medicine in health and bringing in climate. And this has also just been a year so, a little, you know off, not off topic because it's certainly ingrained in everything. But it's been a just a tough past year with COVID, of course, all the social unrest after the murders of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor and, and too many other people, people of color, in particular. And so, have you seen anything in the area of graphic medicine or graphic novels or comics, or whatever we're going to use, that said, that's just something different, maybe outside of the graphic medicine piece? But do you follow any of that? Are there some things that, you know, I know, within our library, and within MLA, we're trying to address racial inequities and include, really, all the issues around diversity and inclusion. And do you know some maybe some graphic novels that could help? Like, would you introduce anything? Have you seen anything popping up that would be good?

Matthew Noe 21:03

Oh, yeah, yeah. There are things popping up now. There are things that have been out there after a while. [SG: Yeah, yeah.] Yeah. Another link for the show notes maybe is... [SG: yeah.] So I'm... as we're recording this in June, I'm the president-elect for the ALA Graphic Novels and Comics Round Table. I'll become president after annual. But, so, throughout the last year and a half, we've been working in collaboration with the Black caucus of ALA to create, to create lists and programming around comics and the Black Lives Matter movement. And so there's, there's at least three lists publicly available on the GNCRT website. One of them, one of them is explicitly on Black Lives Matter and comics. And so there's all kinds of things, like March by the late John Lewis. Like that's kind of the, if you're looking for one comic to go pick up about, you know, social justice, that's the one I'm gonna plug – because, it's a trilogy and it's fantastic. I think he's got a posthumous, another one coming out this fall. [SG: Wow. I'll look for that.] And then there's... No, go ahead...

Sally Gore 22:19

I was just thinking about, you know, in our library, and I know others' as well, probably, we did a book discussion group through COVID because we're off. We read How to be an Anti-Racist and had really good discussions around that. And then in my personal book group, a while back, we read Nora Krug's Belonging, about how she grew up in Germany, or families in Germany growing up and how you reconcile, you know, the regular people, and a lot of Hannah Arendt and stuff that was a part of it. [MN: And it was a comic.] Yes. And that was a comic. So we did we read that graphic... that was our first one in our book group that we, you know, read as a graphic novel and, and it prompted a lot, you know, it, it brings up a different way of looking at things and thinking things. So, when you think about having discussions around racial injustice, and Black Lives Matter, and diversity and inclusion, like, I can see how, how this would be another... Memoirs are great and you know, I'd like to get the personal story out, but, because I can see some graphic novels being great, too. I haven't read the John [Lewis], but I'm gonna go get those. [MN: They're actually in the collection at Lamar Soutter.] Okay, good. You know, I think, I bet that's what I saw on the bottom. Are there like four volumes? No, I saw something on the bottom shelf today when I was looking around. [MN: There were three in that one.] Oh, there are three. I'll go, I'll go look for him. Yeah.

Matthew Noe 23:47

Yeah, yeah. But so I always include stuff like that in graphic medicine collections, because it's relevant. [SG: It certainly is.] Just want to drop another name to go look up: WhitTaylor. She's on the, she's on the Graphic Medicine International Collective board with us, but she's also she's got a background in public health - and she's a cartoonist. Most of her, most of the work for her in graphic medicine has been web comics. But if you go to the nib.com, it's a webcomic platform. [SG: I followed it. That doesn't surprise you.] She's done a number of great comics that are, that overlap this conversation about medicine and racial inequality. Particularly, one of her most powerful ones, I think, is about black women's mortality and giving birth because it's, [SG: yeah] It's such a dramatic difference from every other racial group. And it kind of explores why. And she also has one about Tuskegee as a comic - and health sciences librarians know all about that.

Sally Gore 24:53

Yes. Yeah. Thank you. Those are great recommendations. And again, I'll, um, I'll have you.... I'll look them up and what I can't find I'll touch base with you. So we're sure to put all of these things in our little notes about it. So, any, any, that you, boy, you've covered a lot. And you've given us so many great recommendations of things to start with, either personally, or... What's the first graphic novel you ever read? I just, I just tossing that question out. I didn't prep you on that one. I was trying to think of it myself today: what's the first one I ever read?

Matthew Noe 25:31

First western-like graphic novel? I don't think I know. But so like, the first manga I can remember? The first manga I can remember is actually Naruto. Probably not surprising, given my age and when it came out, but like, no, like Naruto, Bleach. And one I returned to constantly, even as an adult now, is Full Metal Alchemist, which is actually, depending on how you want to read it and evaluate it, counts as graphic medicine. Alice Jagers, who I mentioned before, she's actually talked about that before, like in a different podcast, because it's about, the brief synopsis is basically it's this fantasy world where alchemy is a real thing. And the main character's mother, their mother dies, and they try to transmute

her back to life, which is forbidden. Because it does – spoiler: it's not possible. But it results in one of the brothers losing his entire body and his spirit just being attached to a suit of armor. And the other brother loses an arm and a leg. But there's, there's this stuff called automail. So like actually workable, real, like artificial limbs. Well, yeah. So there's, there's a lot of conversations in there about, you know, what's the value of human life and the ethics of trying to, you know, what's going too far to save someone's life? [SG: Very much into medicine. Yeah, yeah.] And disability studies are in there. Yeah. Small tangent but like...

Sally Gore 27:01

That's a good one. Yeah. Yeah. I was thinking for myself, which probably, you know, I think, I know, the first graphic novel I read was Alison Bechdel's Fun Home. That was, I, you know, I knew of her and I knew I read Dykes to Watch Out For. And, you know, I saw that and I read it. I just thought it was an absolute work of genius. And I, just... it is a work of genius. She is a genius! But also just the... I was just so struck by the by the format, like, because I had never read... something like... never read a memoir that someone did... My friend Susie Becker has done illustrated memoirs, right? And so I've read hers, but it's not, it was not the same thing. And really, I would say I was just blown away by it. And I've since read a few other things. But yeah...

Matthew Noe 27:58

She's got a new book out, by the way, Alison Bechdel does. [SG: What is it? Which one is it? What's it called?] The Secrets to Superhuman Strength. Yeah, it's a, I have a copy. I haven't been able to read it yet. But it's kind of about, it's about like, how, like superhuman strength, like it's about exercise and trying to be the most fit. And it's got a huge, like, transcendentalist bent to it as well. So...

Sally Gore 28:20

Oh, I'm about to go on vacation. Maybe I have my vacation reading to pick up. Well, thank you so much, Matthew. This has been really great. Thanks for being here with me today. The recording of this, I think, I'm hoping our wonderful sound editor, John, will be able... I think the recording is pretty good. But we are actually interviewing face to face in real life, which is a first for these, for these podcasts. We're very lucky here. We've had some restrictions let go here, Massachusetts, because, thank goodness, we're healthy at the moment. And so we met it a little spot and are here just chatting and beating the heat with some air conditioning. Thank you so much for being here today. Thank you to those of you who are tuning in. You've been listening to Press, Play, Connect, the official podcast of the Medical Library Association. Please join us again next month for another episode. We've got several things lined up between Emily Hurst and myself. All good stuff that you'll want to watch out for. Until then, I'm Sally Gore and I am MLA. [MN: And I Matthew Noe, and I'm also MLA.] Thanks for listening, everyone.