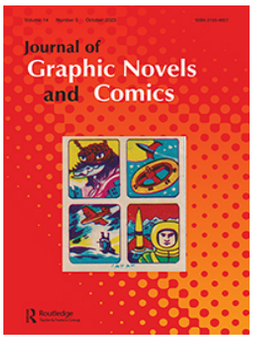

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INTERVIEW

"I don't know how to process experiences unless I put them into comics": an interview with Raina Telgemeier

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ABSTRACT

In Spring 2023, we sat down with Raina Telgemeier, #1 *New York Times* bestselling, multiple Eisner Award-winning creator of *Smile*, *Sisters*, *Guts* and many other comics to share our love of her work and how she has changed the conversation around comics. She shared with us her journey into comics, why the form lends itself so well to life writing, and her thoughts on the formal elements of sequential art. We also talked about how she creates her comics with her child readers in mind and especially enjoys opening up the world of comics to the inner lives of girls and well as boys. We hear a little about her upcoming work and the current retrospective of her work at the Billy Ireland Cartoon Library and Museum in Columbus, Ohio.

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In Spring 2023, we sat down with Raina Telgemeier, #1 *New York Times* bestselling, multiple Eisner Award-winning creator of *Smile, Sisters, Guts* and many other comics to share our love of her work and how she has changed the conversation around comics. She shared with us her journey into comics, why the form lends itself so well to life writing, and her thoughts on the formal elements of sequential art. We also talked about how she creates her comics with her child readers in mind and especially enjoys opening up the world of comics to the inner lives of girls and well as boys. We hear a little about her upcoming work and the current retrospective of her work at the Billy Ireland Cartoon Library and Museum in Columbus, Ohio.

Vera Camden and Valentino Zullo: Thank you for meeting with us. We're such fans of your work!

Raina Telgemeier: Thank you.

Camden and Zullo: To start off would you share a bit about your creative journey with us?

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Telgemeier: I was a kid who liked to read and to draw. So, when I found that you could put those two things together in comics, everything made sense to me as far as what I wanted to do. I was nine years old when that happened. It happened because I read *Calvin and Hobbes* and *For Better or For Worse* and *Peanuts* and *Luann* and *The Far Side*. I was also lucky that I had parents who were receptive to it – they always gave me stuff to draw with and sent me to art classes. When I got into reading comics, my dad said, 'Alright, let's start going to the bookstore and I'll buy you the collections of your favourite comic strips.' I also started drawing my own comics around that same time, just trying to figure out how to make them work: learning how to tell jokes and land punchlines, and how to set up characters and tell a story in only four panels.

I also loved *Nancy* by Ernie Bushmiller. My dad found big collection of *Nancy* comic strips at a used bookstore and gave it to me. *Nancy* is such a funny exercise in, like, formal comic strip humour and writing, and there's no characterisation that happens – it's all about gags. I found it so delightful.

At that time, I wasn't really aware of comic books. I didn't read a superhero comic until I was probably twenty years old, so my preferred format was the strip format. When I was a little older, I discovered Indie comics and self-published stuff, mini comics and the 'zine world. It really opened up my eyes and I realised, 'There are stories that I want to tell that are longer than four panels.' I liked that even though a full page of panels continues onto the next page, the page turn itself is a storytelling device and you can still use each page as a beat, the way you would a comic strip. I was in college when this happened, and I started playing around and writing short stories, and then started publishing my own mini comics – mostly short stories about my life as a college student and my friends in New York. I was going to the School of Visual Arts in Manhattan, so I was surrounded by a lot of other people that were interested in comics. That included some of my professors and mentors, who were editors and professional cartoonists. I was so fortunate to have access to their knowledge and their archives, and it all kind of came together. I also started going to small press festivals: the MoCCA Arts Festival in New York, the Small Press Expo in Bethesda, Maryland, and Alternative Press Expo in San Francisco. That's how I got into the Indie comics scene. People's response to my work was 'Oh that's nice. You're telling stories about your life as a young woman.' I was also occasionally including stories about my childhood, and those were the ones that people seemed to respond the best to.

Camden and Zullo: So, your early work in memoir was speaking to people.

Telgemeier: I took that feedback as encouragement. I started focusing more heavily on childhood memory, childhood trials and tribulations, the relationship with my family, my sister and my brother. And people's responses were overwhelming. Parents were looking at the mini comics on my table at shows and asking, 'Is this comic appropriate for my child to read?' And I would say, 'Issue number six is perfectly fine for your child to read! But maybe not number three, because there's some, um, college stuff, and I don't know if that would be appropriate for them.' I felt like I was onto something, but I didn't know where I was going with it because there wasn't a publishing industry for children's comics at the time.

Camden and Zullo: What year are we talking about?

Telgemeier: This was like 2003, 2004. You could still submit to newspapers and try to get a syndicated strip.

Camden and Zullo: Right, different from what you were doing with your books.

Telgemeier: I was making short stories, mostly. There were publishers like Oni Press and Top Shelf Comics, but they were mostly interested in work aimed at adult audiences. I was friendly with a lot of the folks in indie publishing, I could have probably found a home for my short story work, but it just never felt like a perfect connection. So, it seemed like absolutely great fortune that in 2004 and 2005, the larger trade book publishers started getting interested in comics. Scholastic developed the Graphix imprint, First Second Books developed their line of graphic novels, Simon and Schuster and Hyperion were getting into the game. So suddenly, it was children's book editors and trade book editors that were coming to these mini comics festivals and looking through the little books that we were making. That is how I met my editor at Graphix, David Saylor. He was at San Diego Comic Con and so was I, and he bought one of my mini comics and said 'Oh, this is really great. Why don't you come in and have a meeting?'

Camden and Zullo: Wow. What a moment!

Telgemeier: I had met his colleague, Janna Morishima, a few months prior at a party in New York. They were hard at work developing Graphix, and actively looking for cartoonists to work with. They both thought I might be a good fit. I just thought, 'Scholastic, wow!' That's the publisher that we've all dreamed of being with someday, as authors and illustrators. I mean, any kid can probably name a Scholastic book. We grow up with them in America – they come into the schools with Book Fairs, and send book order forms home with Book Clubs, a magical experience for a child. Meeting Janna and David was just this beautiful – I don't want to say coincidence, because it really wasn't – it was just that all these things happened at the same time, and I was in the right place to take advantage of that.

But Graphix wanted to publish full-length graphic novels. I was still doing mini comics and short stories, and was not quite ready to hit 'go.' I wasn't ready to tell my own full-length stories at that time. That is how I ended up getting *The Baby-sitters Club* gig (Figure 1). They thought I had a lot of potential, but I didn't have a graphic novel pitch ready to submit. Conversationally, they asked what books I liked to read when I was a kid, and I told them that I had been a big *Baby-sitters Club* fan – books that I discovered in school via Scholastic Book Clubs! Their eyes lit up and they said, 'You know, that's

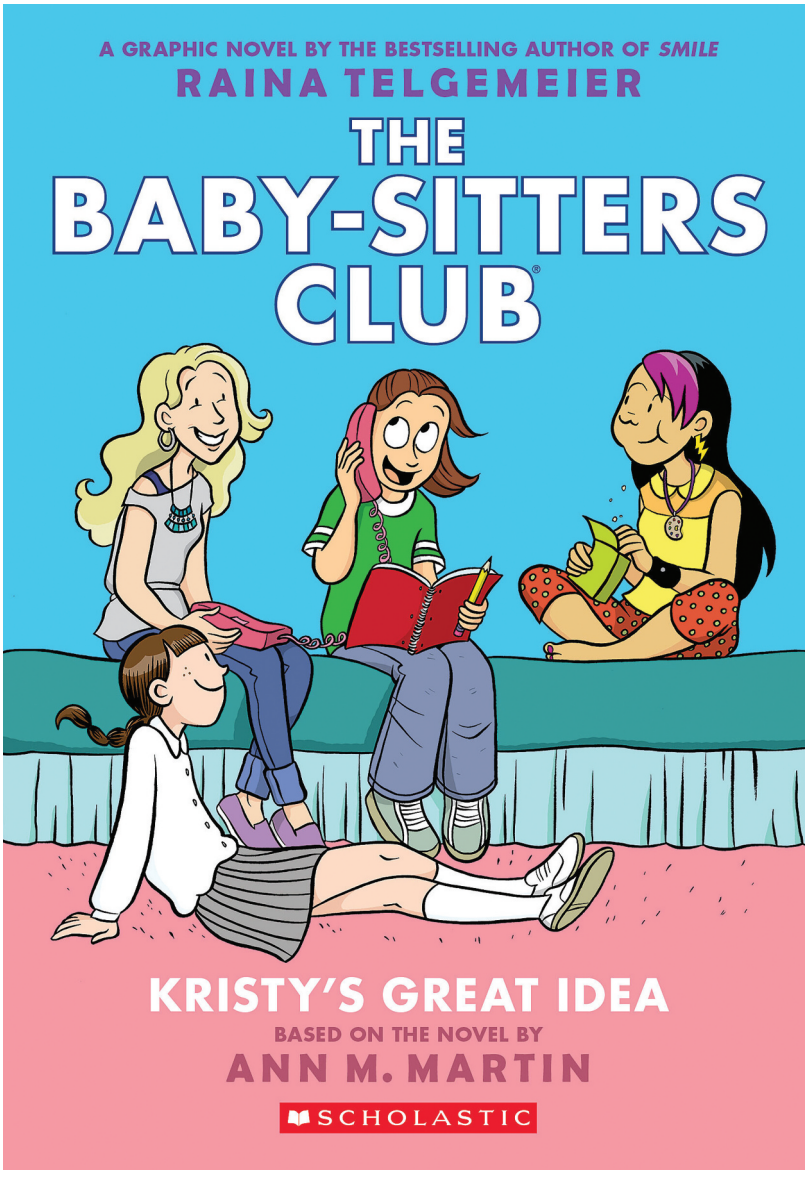

Figure 1. Cover art by Raina Telgemeier for *the Baby-sitters Club* #1. ©Scholastic. Reprinted with permission.

a Scholastic series, and the stories still have a huge fan base. What do you think about doing a comics adaptation?' It was like the perfect thing had just landed in my lap, something that I loved to read and now something that I loved to do, and I could bring those two things together – what could be better?! I signed up to do two adaptations and that quickly turned into four, and they were published starting in 2006. For me, it was great training wheels. Now I had an editorial team and a yearly deadline, I wasn't worried about the structure of the story, and I could put everything I had into the acting of the

characters and the drawing of them. It was a ton of work, but it whet my appetite for what came next.

At the same time, 2004, I was offered a slot on a website called Girlamatic.com which was aimed at comics for women and girls. Web comics and the community around them were still developing in those days. I wasn't sure if there were any kids reading web comics, but I decided to just start posting pages on the site and see what happened. The story I wanted to tell was a story about my two front teeth. It was an experience that I'd had in middle school, a dental accident, and its social circumstances,how I had felt, and all the dentistry involved. It was a story I had been telling orally for years, and in the back

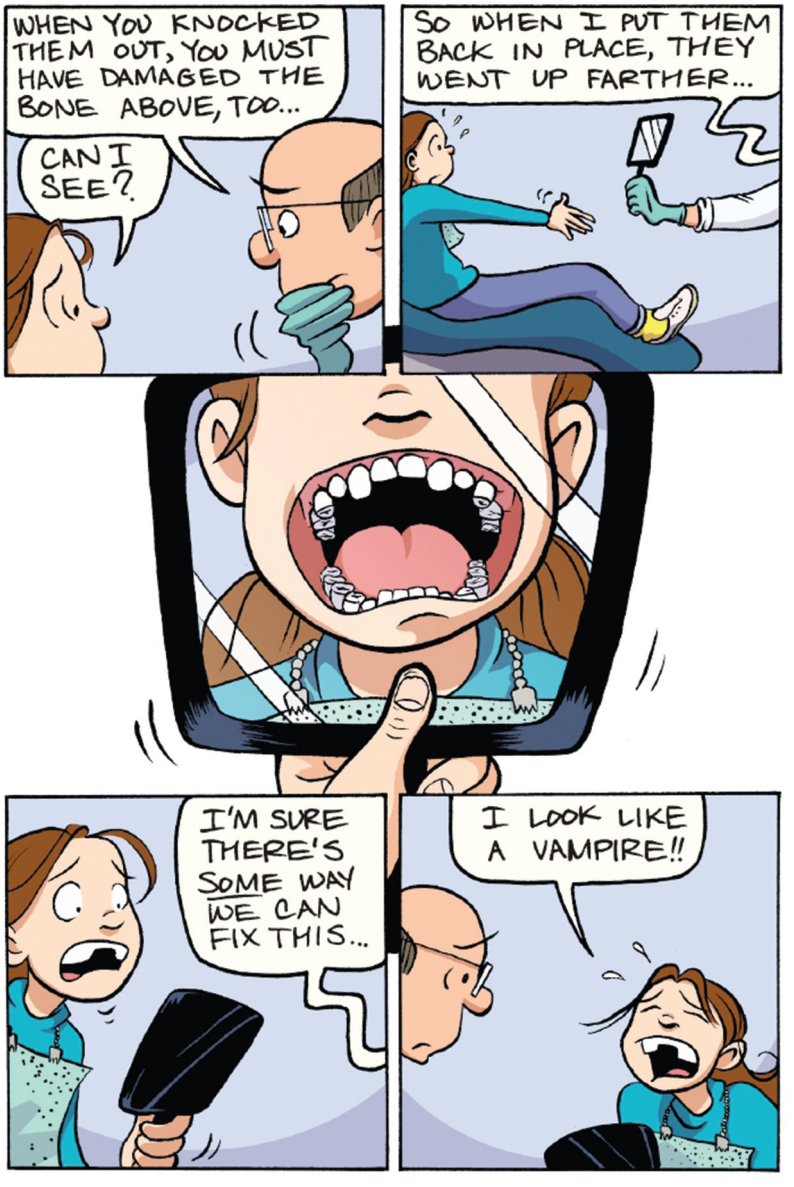

Figure 2. From *Smile*, p. 24 by Raina Telgemeier. ©Scholastic. Reprinted with permission.

of my head, I figured, 'Someday I'll just write a comic about this and then I will never have to tell it again.' So that was *Smile* (Figure 2). I started posting *Smile* at the same time that I began to adapt the first *Baby-sitters Club* graphic novel. So those two projects came to be completely in tandem.

Camden and Zullo: You just said that, 'then I won't ever have to tell it again.' Do you mean that you sort of told the story over and over again but once you get it written and kind of codified in comics that it's sort of done within yourself? Is that accurate?

Telgemeier: That's close. It was that the story itself was so complicated and had so many twists and turns that it took a while to tell, and people just could not believe it. Without visuals, it felt like I was doing my story itself a disservice. Some stories, you just want to show instead of tell. So that was a big part of it: 'I really need to *show* this story.'

Camden and Zullo: It's a great example, though, of the function of the visual. I mean, we do a lot of thinking and talking about how it is that visual allows for access to different parts not only of a story representation, but also parts of the self, of the psyche.

Telgemeier: Absolutely.

Camden and Zullo: What becomes really interesting is that there was something the way that you put that, when you said, 'And then I didn't have to tell it again.' Maybe you processed the impact of that experience.

Telgemeier: It also really set the tone for what my career would become. After *Smile*, I didn't think I'd write another story about my life. Like, 'I've told the story. That's it. I've told the whole thing, and now you know.' But then, kids had a really strong response to the book when it was published in 2010. Immediately they started asking me when a 'Smile II' was coming out.

Camden and Zullo: Another story!

Telgemeier: And I thought, 'Well I only knocked out my teeth once, and got them corrected once, and that story's been told. So, there's no such thing as 'Smile II.' What they really wanted, though, was more about my characters, my memories, my experience

navigating life as a young person. I began a pattern of doing a memoir, and then writing a book that was fiction, doing another memoir, coming back to something that was a little less personal, and so on. Even though all of my work is personal, it is nice to take a breather and stand back from those absolutely raw feelings. But I seem to keep coming back to memoir because there is more buried in there. There is more feeling, more for me to process.

Camden and Zullo: Fantastic. From our standpoint, it feels like a self-analysis, in a way. It's true that once memories are stirred that often opens up other associations and memories. It's such a great way to help other people access their memories, too. These stories begin to trigger things for other people.

Telgemeier: It does. I have a careful balance to strike: how much of myself do I want to share? How much is appropriate to talk about with kids? How can I talk about it with kids in a way that's going to help them feel less alone? What would I have liked somebody to say to me, when I was a kid going through a bout of anxiety or uncertainty?

I quickly discovered that after finishing a very personal story and thinking 'Okay, now I don't have to tell it again,' isn't true! Because a kid reads the book, and then they want to talk about it. They want to ask me questions and tell me things about themselves. So, I've ended up having a million conversations with a million different readers. It isn't possible for me to converse directly with every one of them, but I can continue to have conversations with myself, and write books based on those. The role I have now is really different from where I started, but it feels like it went in a logical direction, and it's super fulfilling. I feel like there's a reason to get up and do what I do most days.

Camden and Zullo: Absolutely. When you were saying it's not just coincidence, it's almost like providence. There's a way that it is meant to be, a destiny feeling and that must be very fulfilling.

Telgemeier: It's pretty cool. I try not to think about it in such lofty terms, just that I feel so lucky and fortunate.

Camden and Zullo: Can we take a step back for a second? You mentioned comic strips and its formal qualities. Do you find yourself relying upon that structure in your work? Do you think you use the beats you learned from comic strips, for example, as you tell your long form stories?

Telgemeier: Oh yes. I grew up with the strip format, dailies are usually about four panels long and a Sunday might be eight or nine, so when you read them on a daily basis, you start to catch the rhythm of the day. There's usually between three and six panels on my

pages, I keep it breezy, but absolutely – you start to walk through life with that rhythm in your head. You hear the things that people say, the call and response, your senses get attuned to looking for the punchlines. Even with my earliest comic book works, every page still ends on a beat. I think that's because I was making *Smile* for the web, one page per week – every page needed to feel like a satisfying conclusion. They weren't necessarily punchlines, though. That was the thing that I struggled with the most as a kid trying to make comics: jokes are hard, humour is hard. I know now that most humour comes from characters within a situation, and not just 'Here's a setup for a funny punchline, and there's a pun at the end of this one.' That's how Nancy did it, but it's not the only way. Still, I tried really hard to write funny jokes, people would read them and they wouldn't laugh. It felt like I was clearly doing something wrong. I started approaching the funniest kids at school, the class clowns, and asking them to write comic strips for me to draw. They would say 'Oh, sure.' And then it would never happen, or we would try and it just wouldn't work. I don't think any of my friends were into comics the way I was.

But I was a journal keeper. I think that's the other key piece of my becoming a memoir cartoonist: I've been keeping a journal since I was ten and still do to this day, and for a really long time my journal was illustrated heavily, so I was basically drawing daily comics all through middle school, all through high school and most of college. I also would go back and read my journals periodically. Like, in high school, I'd sit down with my middle school journals and read through them and go, 'Oh my gosh I was such an embarrassing person, I can't believe I was so obsessed with [whatever I was obsessed with at the time]."

Camden and Zullo: But you didn't destroy them.

Telgemeier: No, I've kept everything. I still have them.

Camden and Zullo: A lot of kids do destroy them. Not to get too lofty again but Jane Austen had these early juvenilia and she didn't destroy them. In fact, she bound them. They're now really treasure troves to see where she came from. They are amazing and even include some illustrations.

Telgemeier: Oh cool! I'll have to look into those!

Camden and Zullo: When Jane Austen was an adolescent she created in her own hand a book with binding and she made it very formal. It was her book. So, even though you might've been like 'Oh my God' looking back at them, you also knew that this was something you wanted to hang on to.

Telgemeier: I did! I didn't know it then, but I was writing my journals in the style of whoever I was reading at the time. I was reading a lot of *Baby-Sitters Club*, I was

reading Judy Blume and Beverly Cleary. I was reading a lot of women writers who write about girlhood. They weren't necessarily doing memoir, but they were writing realistically. They were writing characters and everyday problems I could relate to. I tried to write my journal entries in that same voice. I think my early writing voice kind of meshed with theirs. So, between all of those women middle grade authors, and *For Better or for Worse* by Lynn Johnston, who was doing something similar on the comic strip page, I think they paved the way for the type of writer that I became and the type of artist I am. I've tried to draw fantasy and imaginary things and it is not my wheelhouse at all. I don't read a ton of fantasy either, that might be part of it. I've always loved realistic fiction and memoir and biographies, and it makes perfect sense now. 'Of course, I was headed in this direction.' If I hadn't pursued a degree in illustration, journalism might have made sense, or something in that sphere. I did do high school journalism – I was on the newspaper staff for a year as their editorial cartoonist. That was really fun.

Camden and Zullo: That's funny. Do you have them?

Telgemeier: Not many. The school paper has an archive online – so I've got some really horrible low-res versions of a few of my drawings. The problem is they wouldn't make any sense to a general audience, because they were inside jokes.

Camden and Zullo: That's classic high school.

Telgemeier: I felt that way about my work for a long time: that it was just for me, it was just for the people around me, just for my classmates or friends. As a result, I didn't share my work with people unless I was doing a big poster for a school dance or that sort of thing. I didn't really share my comics; I didn't publish them. It was just all in my journals. It was really private. When I started self-publishing my mini comics and intentionally writing stories for an audience, I was shocked that people were interested in reading what I did.

Camden and Zullo: Ironically, it was the very privacy, in a sense, which captured your audience!

Telgemeier: Right. I meant to circle back to this, which is that those journals have proven to be so valuable. I can still read what twelve-year-old me was thinking. I still have access to her. I don't know if that's why I've continued to have such a good memory of those years, or if I'm able to capture the voice because I can literally still read it. Probably some combination of the two. I feel lucky again that my parents didn't throw stuff away. They were like 'Oh, we have a child who likes to write and draw. Let's keep pieces of that around.'

Camden and Zullo: That comes through reading *Sisters* and it comes through so much that your parents understood the value. I love the kind of leitmotif of the coloured pencils. It's just sort of a pattern through the whole thing.

It's also interesting how many cartoonists especially, a lot of writers will talk about this, but cartoonists especially – Alison Bechdel, Carol Tyler, Emil Ferris – all think about the diary, the documentation of everyday life and it's relation to comics.

Telgemeier : I think it's because comics are meant to be read quickly and they can be drawn quickly, too. They act like a daily meditation, they allow you to sort of exist in a third space; you're not quite in reality, you're not quite telling a fictional story on the page, you're somewhere in between. You're depicting yourself as a character, you're stepping back from your own human life and lived feelings and experiences and translating that into something on the page with lines and strokes that can be absorbed and felt by another person. I think the simplicity of comics is partly why they're so easy to understand. I love that you can hand them to somebody who speaks a different language, and they'll still see something that they recognise in them.

I don't understand it. It's amazing. I wish I could understand that better. But it's addicting. I love it. I loved it for so many decades that I don't think I could ever stop, but I also feel a little bit held back by it. I don't know how to think in any other way. I don't know how to process experiences unless I put them into comics.

Camden and Zullo: That's really fascinating.

Telgemeier: It is! But when people ask me to speak about an experience 'in my own words' or when they ask me to tell them more, I actually feel like I can't! It's very hard for me to speak without showing pictures. I don't feel like I know how to write without drawing little emojis or little doodles in the margins.

Camden and Zullo: But you do it so well. We were looking at *Sisters* and there is one expression that sort belongs to that sort of ten to thirteen year old girl and its absolutely perfect and yet that is the mystery. Because we were looking more closely, it's just like one line, her mouth, but it captures the expression perfectly. You know this, you don't need us to tell you, but it's extremely impressive.

Telgemeier: Comics has the ability to capture a facial expression, but the reader gets to control the pace that they're reading the comic. They can linger on a drawn expression for a split second or they can linger on it for an hour. I wonder if, with kids in particular,

it's like they can look at a stressful drawing and then move past it quickly if they want to. They can choose how long they want to linger in any emotion on the page. Being able to control the pace of feelings, we don't get the opportunity to do that in in real life. We also can't control other people's feelings. And sometimes when you're a young person, it can seem like whatever you're feeling at this exact moment is going to be stuck in time forever. But if you're reading a memoir, and on page four the character has a traumatic experience, you can see that there's two hundred more pages after this in your hands. So there's got to be some other feelings that follow. Maybe that's hopeful to a young reader. But you're also allowed to stay and linger on the discomfort if you wish.

You can't do this with film, you can't pause a movie every time you want to feel something. I mean, you can, but it's not the way most people watch movies. Prose, you don't get to see. Words are great, language is great, but the ways that writers use language is so vast and varied that the language of prose resonates differently with different readers. I've always liked really clear prose. I like prose that describes action and the ways people relate to each other. I like dialogue. I love prose that gives you a window into the characters' heads. I'm not surprised I've chosen to focus on that kind of storytelling.

Camden and Zullo : That internal exploration is really interesting to think of in relation to film or other media that might be action oriented, where things are moving so fast.

Telgemeier : I get overwhelmed when I watch modern movies because they do go so fast. And there's so much to keep track of that I often lose the thread, and just tune out for that thirty-minute period where there's a battle sequence or something.

Camden and Zullo: Speaking of action, we wanted to ask about a moment in *Sisters* where Raina is with a with a bunch of boy cousins and they they're like, 'What comics do you read' and you say *Calvin and Hobbes* and *Foxtrot*. There's a great moment where they say, 'Psssh. Those aren't **real** comics.' Right? (Figure 3). We were thinking of how comics gets delegated or has been, until recently, delegated to boys, and yet they're inhabiting you. That's like telling you that those people aren't your friends or something that you shouldn't hang around those people.

Telgemeier: I'm doing a little bit of subversion when I write scenes like that; pointing a lens at how things were fifteen, twenty years ago and how in some ways they still are. There's still a lot of stereotypes that need to be broken down, including that graphic novels are still seen by many as not books, not literature, not 'real reading,' but *so many people* are reading these books. So, any chance I get, I like to kind of flip the script, and do it with humour.

Camden and Zullo: Can we talk about time in comics now? What is really interesting is the way you capture how kids experience time, like moments can go on forever when you

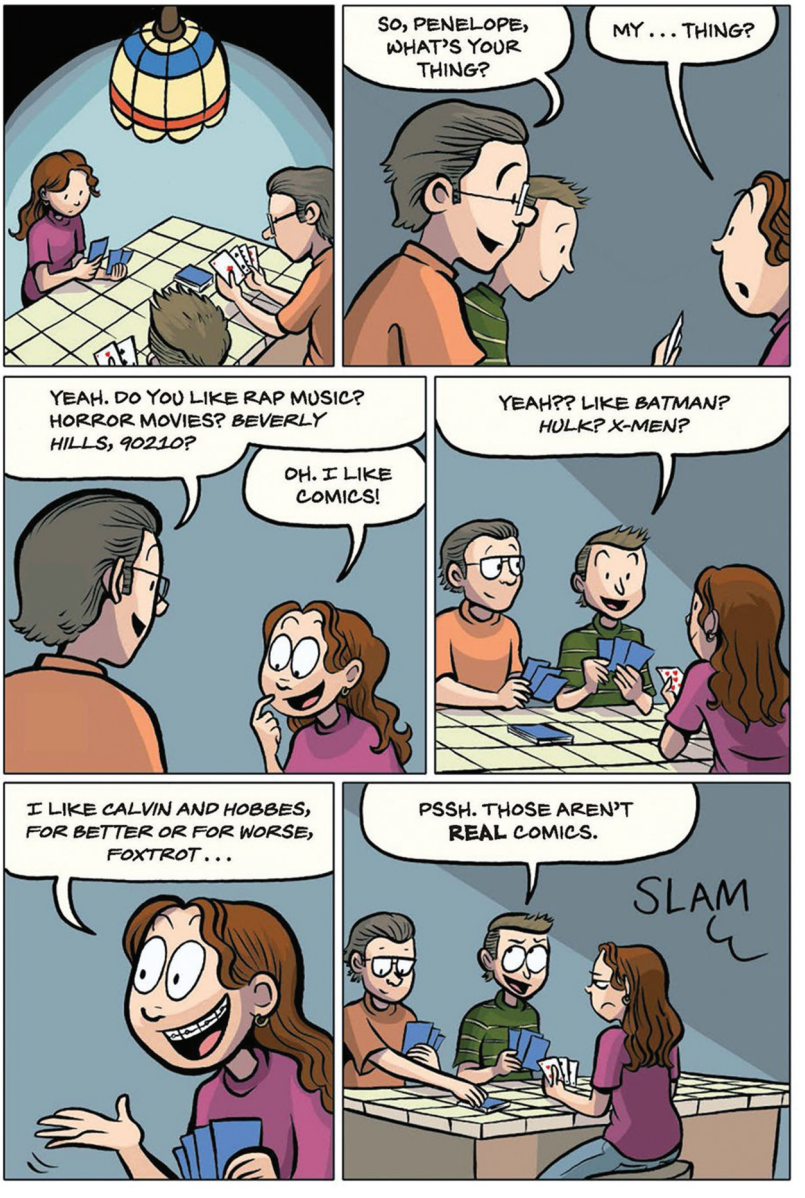

Figure 3. From *Sisters*, p. 117 by Raina Telgemeier. ©Scholastic. Reprinted with permission.

are a kid, like in *Sisters* when you wait in the car for your mom. At least reading it, it feels like that time went on forever.

Telgemeier: It felt that way.

Camden and Zullo: How do you understand that experience of time and how comics allow you to do that? Particularly in contrast to what you're saying about zoning out during a battle scene that goes on for thirty minutes? Comics do the opposite of that for people. You can't really zone out.

Telgemeier: I'm glad that you two are asking these kinds of questions, cause it's allowing me to think about stuff that's always kind of floating in there. So, comics usually exist inside of panels, right? So, if each panel has four sides, classically it's kind of like four walls. So, each moment in a comic is kind of like a moment of being trapped. If you're showing a kid in their bedroom bored out of their mind, and you show ten panels of the same thing, that's like saying that you're in your room for ten hours. A room is usually a square – four sides. That's what comes to mind when I think of boredom: being stuck in a room. And because you can play with panels, you can have big ones and small ones, panels that don't have borders on them, full page sequences with no panels at all . . . you can play with time. You can play with how a character feels in a space, you can make the character really big inside of a tiny box or you can make a tiny character within a huge box. It's communicating something that we can feel as a reader.

When I talk with people who have never made comics or haven't read them, and they want to know how to do it, I say: 'start with the six panel grid on a page – all the same size, really simple. Now try to tell a story within those six panels. When you finish, that's your first draft.' Your second draft should be about figuring out which of those moments should be a larger moment, which of those moments should be smaller. Do you still want to use six panels on a page, or do you want to make it into a two-page sequence? I write in beats. I write in moments, and then I think about how to show those moments in the way that's going to be most interesting for the reader.

I'll go back to that road trip sequence in *Sisters* you mentioned. The first half of the book is the family driving to Colorado from San Francisco. It's this long trip. It took place over the course of about a week, but the most interesting moment in that book for me is when they finally arrive at the cousins' house at night-time, right after they've parked the car, and they've waited for this moment for so long . . . and suddenly they don't want to go in yet (Figures 4 and 5). I have that experience every time I take a trip somewhere, where I think, 'That took forever. But now that I've arrived, I'm not sure I'm ready to be here yet.' I don't know if people pick up on that, but to me, it's the most emotional moment in the book for some reason. It's also wordless, which is another way you can play with time in comics. I like that breath, that pause. It's a really quiet scene, but it's meant to be.

Camden and Zullo: And of course, it's night. There's a universality in that.

Telgemeier: Yes. I never know what my work's about. It's interesting when I write a story and send it to my editor and then my editor writes the copy for the back of the book to describe what the book is about, that's the first time I actually know. It's not until they

Figure 4. From *Sisters*, pp. 114–115 by Raina Telgemeier. ©Scholastic. Reprinted with permission.

summarise that it's about two sisters who are looking for common ground when I'm like 'Oh, it's true! Hey, nice.' So I look forward to that. I look forward to my stories being summarised by other people.

Camden and Zullo: That's the privilege of being an artist. That's why we're so grateful that you're sharing these thoughts with us because it's the role of the critic to do some interpreting. Your way of thinking about the comic frame as a room is quite striking.

Figure 5. From *Sisters*, pp. 114–115 by Raina Telgemeier. ©Scholastic. Reprinted with permission.

Telgemeier: Maybe it is easier to think of it as a window, because if you imagine windowpanes – if you were to draw a picture on each windowpane – it would look like a comic. Then you're able to peer into these little windows or into these rooms and see what's in there, a character waiting for something to happen, wishing that somebody could step into the room with them.

Camden and Zullo: Do you think that sort of peering into the window feeling you are describing is what lends comics to depicting the internal experience?

Telgemeier: I have a very visual memory, so it's easy for me to expand into an entire memory-based story from just a single image. Lynda Barry talks about the 'image' as a really strong moment in memory, visual or not, that can use to build a scene from the inside out. For me, images sometimes come in the form of a flavour or a scent, or a picture in an album that I haven't seen before. It's when you go, 'I remember that outfit that I was wearing. I remember when my grandmother took me to buy that dress. I remember my grandmother's neighbourhood, I remember what she used to serve me for dinner, and her neighbour who lived down the hall . . . ' Starting small, with an image or two, and then pulling outwards has always been the way I write stories. Connecting the dots between different images and memories, as a cartoonist, means filling in the human parts, the internal feelings and facial expressions and body language and dialog that bridges the gaps.

I love reading other cartoonists' autobio work, where I feel a ton of empathy for a person I've never met, who has a life nothing like mine, but through their story I feel like I was there with them. It's rewarding to be able to do this for young readers and show them,

> I was a kid like you. I am no longer a kid, which you can see because there's a photo of me in the back of the book, but that's proof I lived through this thing. You're going to get past this too.

I think I'm coming back to the same theme from before, how there are two hundred pages left in the story.

Camden and Zullo: You pretty frequently return to the idea that you're thinking about your reader, your child reader, you really do think about that child reader and – we dare say – almost you're speaking to that child reader.

Telgemeier: That's what it feels like.

Camden and Zullo: That's not common. Like *Guts*, that's a really tough book.

Telgemeier: It is, yes. It was.

Camden and Zullo: But how powerfully it speaks to so many kids: Where Raina asks, 'what's wrong with me?' and she is shipped off to some doctor. That is not an easy story to tell and yet it's tolerable. You can deal with it. There's enough funny/not funny stuff with the vomit and all that.

Telgemeier: Thank you. It was a really tough book to write. I could never have written *Guts* without first writing *Smile* and *Sisters*. Even in my fiction work, I was able to examine things like anxiety from a step back without it being about my character. When *Ghosts* was published in 2016, I went on book tour. I would describe the characters and say 'the older sister suffers from anxiety, which is something I can relate to,' and then I'd move on to the next character (Figure 6). It was the adults in the audience who would

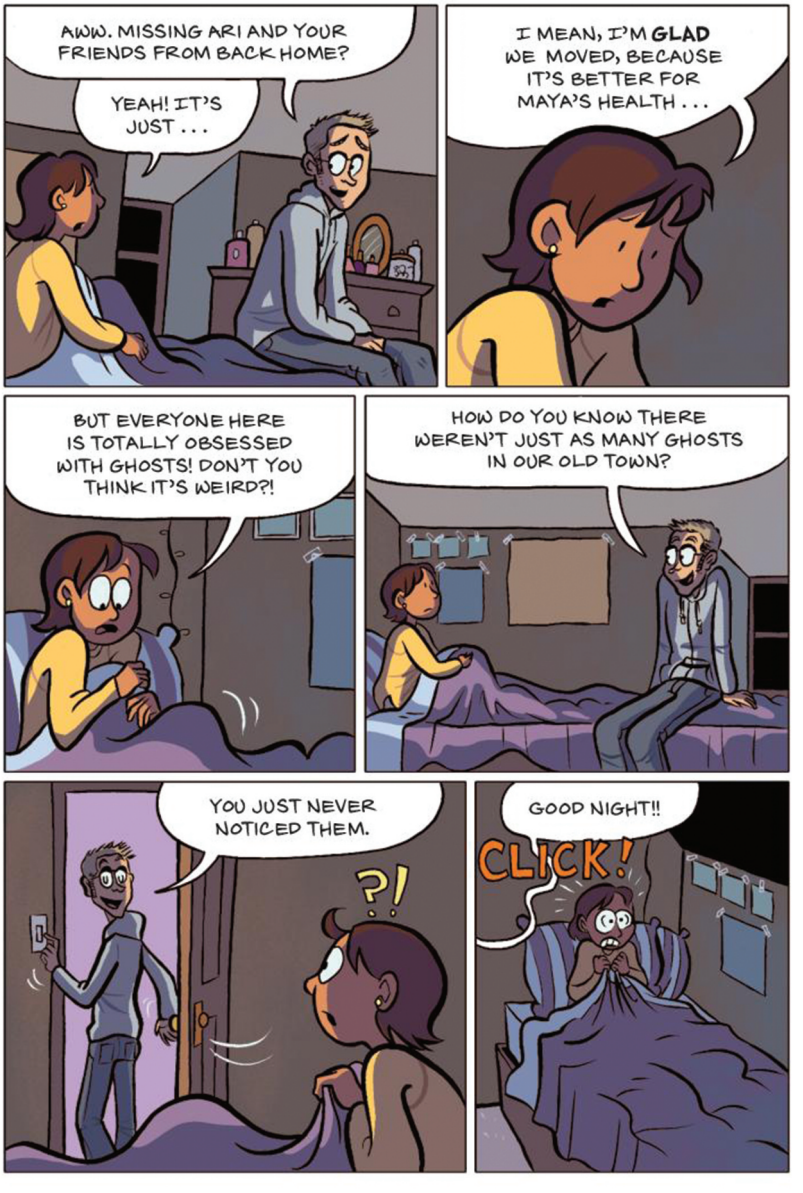

Figure 6. From *ghosts*, pp. 52 by Raina Telgemeier. ©Scholastic. Reprinted with permission.

stop me and go, 'Wait, come back, can you talk a little bit more about that?' Like, 'I had anxiety as a kid, or my daughter's really anxious. We want to hear your story.' I started hearing that frequently and it got me thinking, 'There's something here. Maybe this is something I need to talk about.' But again, I couldn't have written it earlier in my career, because I needed to establish a level of trust between my readership and myself. I needed them to know that they could trust me as a writer. I needed to be able to trust them, because it was really scary to talk about in front of a million people.

It was difficult to live with severe anxiety and phobia as a child. And then in therapy as an adult, I began to examine everything closely enough be able to say: 'This is me. This is who I am. This is what I fear, and I'm going to talk openly about it.' I recommend it to anybody: write a book about your deepest fears and then see what happens! When you're a kid, you think that people will make fun of you or laugh at you, or they're not going to want to be your friend. But it's the opposite. If you let people in, you'll see the commonality. You'll learn what other people are afraid of and how they can relate, and now you've shared something. Hopefully you feel closer as a result. I needed to get through some life experience before I wrote *Guts*, but suddenly it felt like the right time. I realised I'd made a name by writing my other memories, so that I could write this one.

I needed a break after *Guts* was done, though – both physically and emotionally. The book was published right before the pandemic, so I've been able to take an extended break as a result of that, but I'm back to work now and it's been nice to get back to making comics.

Camden and Zullo: *Guts* with all of the stomach issues, we have to say: how could you do that in any other form but a comic? (Figures 7 and 8).

Telgemeier: It's a good question. After the book was published, I ended up being interviewed by multiple outlets who were doing podcasts and radio shows about mental health. Everyone wanted to talk about anxiety and therapy, they asked about the childhood experience versus the adult experience and who I am now versus who I was then. I loved those conversations, which all coincided with the pandemic, when anxiety was on everyone's minds. I am genuinely interested in the brain how it works. I thought 'Oh my gosh, this could be a whole other career if I wanted it to be.'

Camden and Zullo: Like Lynda Barry!

Telgemeier: I know! She's one of my favourite cartoonists of all time, I started reading her work when I was in middle school. My parents were fans and so they had her books and were like 'Here, you should read these.' I'm so grateful to her. She's a writer whose voice is so strong, just an unparalleled ear for dialog and the rhythm of childhood and memory. She taught me so much about listening, which is one of the greatest skills a writer can have.

I think if I were to just totally switch paths, it would be towards something involving psychology. I love the idea of working with people and helping them through things. I don't know how much space I'd be able to hold for other people's lives and struggles without my

Figure 7. From *Guts*, pp. 22–23 by Raina Telgemeier. ©Scholastic. Reprinted with permission.

empathy washing over into it, so I'm glad that I don't do that for a living, but I'm as much a patient of psychology I as I am a student. During my own therapy sessions, I'm constantly asking questions like, 'Can you explain what's happening in my brain right now?' I really want to understand it and then observe what happens when I put things into practice.

Figure 8. From *Guts*, pp. 22–23 by Raina Telgemeier. ©Scholastic. Reprinted with permission.

Camden and Zullo: You are doing psychology, though – you're doing psychology for so many people by creating these stories.

Telgemeier: It was not what I intended, but sometimes I step back and go, 'Wow, who would've thought? This is perfect. I love this.'

Camden and Zullo: But it's also true Freud admitted over and over again that everything he learned was from the artists and literature. He acknowledged that he was trying to systematise where they had already gone.

So, we know we we've kept you long time, but we want to ask just a couple more things. What are you doing now?

Telgemeier : The Billy Ireland Cartoon Library & Museum in Columbus, Ohio, has a huge retrospective of my work on their walls right now! The show includes my minicomics work, childhood drawings, and a bunch of my published material. It's specifically looking at my comics through the lens of emotions. The show is called *Facing Feelings*. It's up until November 19, 2023. An exhibition catalogue will be published next summer by Scholastic Graphix – look for that in August of 2024! The catalogue will contain the art that's in the show, all of my commentary and annotations, plus an interview with the curator, Anne Drozd, and a foreword by Scott McCloud.

I just got back from the show's opening talk, and it was such a beautifully-designed space that tells a story that draws the viewer in. The Billy is setting a new standard for exhibiting comics and cartoon art. I hope people will go see it!

Camden and Zullo: Exciting! We'll do a pilgrimage. We'll do a road trip. No snakes, though.

Telgemeier: Aw, that'd be so awesome. I have another book project on my desk that won't be announced for a while yet, but it's going to be really awesome and I think it will be very interesting to both of you as well. I'll just say that much.

Camden and Zullo : It sounds like the time off has been very productive for you.

Telgemeier: Yes and no. I didn't feel productive for the past couple of years, but things have revved up again. I finally got the green light on multiple projects a couple of months ago, and now I'm full steam ahead on all of them. Kids always ask 'When's your next book coming out?' And I'm like, 'I can't tell you, but I promise I *am* going to make another book. I'm just not done. Books take a long time!'

Camden and Zullo: One last fun question: what comics are you reading right now? Or what do you want to go back and read?

Telgemeier: One book that I that I recently read and want to give a shout out to is called *Ephemera* by Briana Loewinsohn, published by Fantagraphics. It's a memoir, it is possibly somewhere in the graphic medicine space because it's about a girl whose mother has a mental illness and

is not available and disappears for periods of time. It's told with these really neat old-fashioned colours and images, kind of in the style of old '30s and '40s cartoons.

Camden and Zullo: Very cool.

Telgemeier: The whole book is run through with botanical imagery. She loves to draw flowers. There's two time sequences running in parallel, so the memory parts are told in blue and the present day is told in an ochre scheme. Briana is another Bay Area cartoonist and this is her first published book, and it's so good. It's a pretty short read, but it's also devastating and broke my heart and made me cry (in the best way). That doesn't happen that often these days.

As for what I want to read again, I like to revisit my favourite comic strips every so often. I'm probably due for like a reread of *Calvin and Hobbes*. I did that a few years ago when I first started working on the gallery show, because the Billy included multiple works from a bunch of my influences.

Camden and Zullo: Oh influences, that will be great!

Telgemeier: The Billy has a big enough collection that they had most of my influences on hand. There's some Lynda Barry, some *For Better or for Worse*, and so much more. It's great. I hadn't revisited *Calvin and Hobbes* in a while and when I did, it was like revisiting my own memories – I remember reading it as a kid. I remember who I was. I remember how I felt. I remember what I thought and how I responded. These are 'images' to me.

The strips themselves are so powerful, so perfectly written. My first visit to the Billy Ireland was in 2014, for a joint Bill Watterson and Richard Thompson show. It was the *Cul de Sac* and *Calvin and Hobbes exhibit*, and I made a pilgrimage. I was living in New York and I went all the way to Ohio just to see that, and just stood in the gallery looking at the white-out on the page and started sobbing. I was crying because I was so moved by seeing the actual ink on paper and the eraser lines and just . . . the human touch. These things that I hold so highly, to see them as marks on a page made by another person. That means I can do this, too. That means you can do this, too. That means kids can learn to do this, too.

Camden and Zullo: That's really a lovely story and a nice place to stop! Thank you very much.

Telgemeier: Thank you both.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.