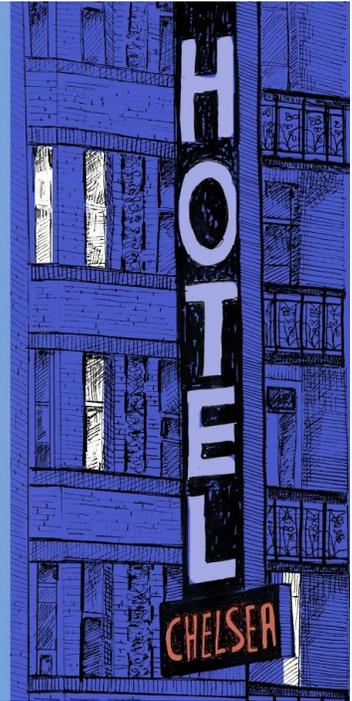


My 1-2-3-4 Months
with
Dee Dee Ramone



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Integrative Project Thesis 2018

I. Introduction

In 1993, my boyfriend's sister Jennifer met and fell in love with Dee Dee Ramone, bassist of seminal 1970's American punk band, *Ramones*. A couple of weeks later, she moved from Ypsilanti to New York City, embarking on a four-month relationship with him. Being half Dee Dee's age, Jennifer's improbable relationship became a source of fascination for her friends back in Michigan, myself included.

Eventually, the romance unraveled, and Jennifer returned home before anyone could meet Dee Dee Ramone. Once Jennifer assimilated back into her old life in Michigan, asking her about him felt intrusive, especially since she wasn't my personal friend. And once her brother and I broke up, I lost all contact with Jennifer. Fifteen years later, though, I reconnected with Jennifer and became her hairstylist. We'd see each other on a regular basis, and over the years became close friends. Then one day, over the course of a hair appointment, she recounted her whirlwind relationship with Dee Dee, and I realized the potential for a story.

That story inspired my thesis project. I will be creating an animated memoir centered around a young woman's search for autonomy in order to bring to light the challenges of coming-of-age love while also exploring methods of storytelling. Using animation, my film illustrates the impulsive nature of my protagonist's romance with an older man and the effects of putting aside one's own emotional needs to meet the expectations of others.



The hairdresser is only partially shown throughout the film exemplifying the limited eye contact between stylist and client in a salon.

II. Contextual Discussion

I. Transforming True Events into Creative Nonfiction

In his book *The Emotional Craft of Fiction*¹, author Donald Maass describes methods to strengthen a narrative arc, including developing a protagonist's inner journey alongside the plot (or "outer journey"). I perceived Jennifer's inner journey as personal growth resulting from the conflicts she faced in New York. Dee Dee would tour for days at a time, leaving her alone at

¹ Maass, Donald. "Chapter Four: Emotions, Meaning, and Arc." In *The Emotional Craft of Fiction*, 57-81. Cincinnati, Ohio: F&W Media Inc, 2016.

The Chelsea Hotel in the dregs of winter. Hindered from finding employment and discouraged from making friends, Jennifer was controlled by Dee Dee whether he was home or away.

As Maass recommended, I developed an inner journey alongside the plot by signifying Jennifer's increasing independence from a turbulent partnership. For example, an outer conflict developed when Jennifer began to call home to alleviate her loneliness. Dee Dee became enraged at the long-distance phone charges, accusing Jennifer of calling ex-boyfriends, and resulting in a physical altercation. Since his emotional instability posed a legitimate threat, Jennifer decided to end their relationship and leave New York.

Initially, writing an inner-monologue seemed the logical choice in expressing Jennifer's inner journey and emotional state. However, in *Telling True Stories: Navigating the Challenges of Writing Narrative Non-Fiction*², Professor of Journalism at the University of Canberra, Matthew Ricketson states that the purpose of interior monologue is to provide "access to the thoughts and feelings of a character." He warns that interior monologue is left to novelists since knowing the feelings of a non-fictional subject is impossible. Considering this, I decided against interior monologue, and implied Jennifer's emotional state through music and imagery.

² Ricketson, Matthew. *Telling True Stories: Navigating the Challenges of Writing Narrative Non-fiction*. Crows Nest: Allen & Unwin, 2015.

II. Storytelling Structure

Since my film includes narration, I examined radio story production. Rob Rosenthal, independent producer for *Transom Story Workshop*, explains how to construct a radio story in his podcast, *Story Structure: The 'e'*.³ This structure involves finding a compelling place in the story that identifies what it's about, and beginning there. Next, the narrative jumps back to the earliest events and continues moving toward the plot point at which it started, thus closing the loop of the cursive 'e'. Once this point is reached, the story continues forward until it reaches its end. I used this method to construct the flashbacks in my animation, which I will elaborate upon later in the *Creative Work* section.

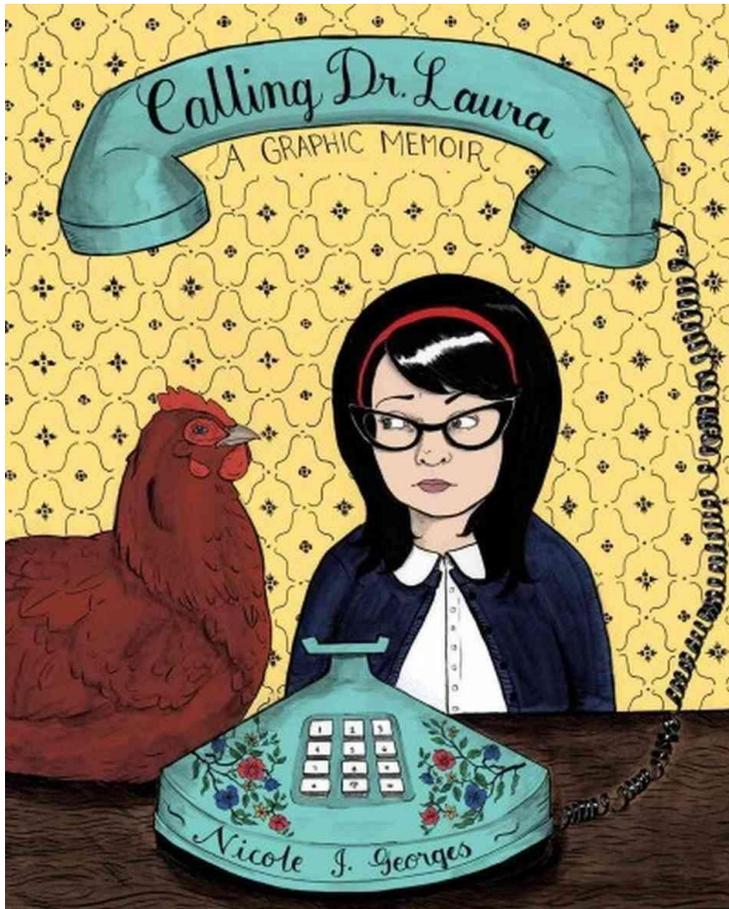
III. Contemporary Artists Working with Graphic Memoir

A. Nicole Georges

In her 2013 graphic memoir *Calling Dr. Laura*⁴, Nicole Georges recounts discovering the true identity of her biological father while struggling with her sexual identity and coping with a dysfunctional family. Georges' linework varies throughout, using a playful, open style when depicting herself as a child, and dense hatching in scenes as an adult. I was struck by the potency of linework when depicting mood, and its effectiveness in distinguishing the past from the present. As a result, exemplifying emotion through varying styles and intensities of linework became a criterion for my own work.

³ Rosenthal, Rob. "Story Structure: The 'e'." *Transom*. August 07, 2017. Accessed April 17, 2018. <https://transom.org/2016/story-structure-e/>.

⁴ Georges, Nicole J. *Calling Dr. Laura: a graphic memoir*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2013.



Nicole Georges, *Calling Dr. Laura*, 2013. The expressive line work gives a playful quality to the imagery.

B. Jennifer Levonian

Animator Jennifer Levonian's 2012 film *The Poetry Winner*⁵ follows college graduate Caitlin as she adjusts to homelife after being away at university. Levonian's watercolor and paper cut-out animations direct viewers' attention toward ordinary household objects in each scene; while the disjointed animation style furthers the film's situational humor. Drawing attention to everyday objects of the past, such as payphones and cassettes, are a signature of my own comic style.

⁵ Jennifer Levonian - Animations & Paintings - The Poetry Winner. Accessed November 10, 2017. <http://www.jenniferlevonian.com/the-poetry-winner/>.

Levonian's film inspired me to push this characteristic further, and to use it as a mechanism for humor.



Jennifer Levonian, *The Poetry Winner*, 2012. Focus is given to a women's magazine rendered in great detail, furthering the scene's humor.

C. Phoebe Gloeckner

Phoebe Gloeckner's 2002 book *Diary of a Teenage Girl: An Account in Words and Pictures*⁶ inspired my concept of illustrating Jennifer's memoir in its printed form, and the subsequent animated work. The semi-autobiographical tale centers around fifteen year old artist Minnie Goetze becoming romantically involved with her mother's boyfriend. I was impressed by the novel's powerful illustrations and raw emotion. Like *Diary*, my film intersects fiction with

⁶ Gloeckner, Phoebe. *The Diary of a Teenage Girl: An Account in Words and Pictures*. Berkeley, CA: North Atlantic Books, 2015.

nonfiction, incorporating factual, detailed ink drawings that illustrate the protagonist's troublesome past.



Phoebe Gloeckner, *Diary of a Teenage Girl: An Account in Words and Pictures*, 2002. The author depicts herself and friend Kimmie on the streets of 1970's San Francisco.

D. Alison Bechdel

Alison Bechdel's 2007 *Fun Home*⁷ expresses the author's coming to terms with her sexual identity and a strained relationship with her homosexual father. What strikes me most about *Fun home* visually is its limited color palette. In *Fun Home*, black and white ink drawings

⁷ Bechdel, Alison. *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2015.

incorporate dreamlike washes of blue into each scene. In my work, black and white ink drawings are accented with cool tones in flashback scenes, and warm tones in the present. The varying palettes express shifts in emotional tone and help viewers distinguish between past and present.



Alison Bechdel, *Fun Home*, 2007. Each panel is limited to three colors: black, white, and blue.

III. Methodology

The production of my film involved nearly my entire art & design skill set, requiring that I strengthen much of it throughout the process. This includes figure studies, storyboarding,

inking, digital painting, image editing, interviewing, audio-recording, sound design, video editing, animation, and graphic design. The project also required extensive documentation, learning new software, brainstorming, planning, experimenting, communicating my ideas, and professionally presenting my work. In the following paragraphs, I will elaborate only on the processes most evident in my final work.

A. Sound Design

I first conducted several audio-recorded interviews with Jennifer⁸, as well as a written interview in Google Docs. The ongoing written interview had begun prior to this project, when Jennifer and I had begun collaborating on a memoir intended for print. The initial audio interviews were conducted both at Jennifer's home and a private workspace that we rented until deciding to record in a soundproof booth. The final audio clips were recorded at the Duderstadt Center with my own *Zoom H2n Handy Recorder*.

Next, I commissioned musicians to write, record, or donate original tracks to my film. Each worked independently after given particular musical objectives. Techno artist Sean Deason was tasked with creating a piece of minor-toned, industrial music reminiscent of a 1990's dance club. Deason used a vintage drum machine to produce a track fitting of that era. Likewise, musicians Roger Dowidait and Andrew Mabry donated their guitar talents to my film with the objectives of creating tension and conveying emotion.

⁸ Felenchak, Jennifer. Interviewed by Ami Seal. Audio Recording. Ypsilanti, Michigan. 08/19/17.

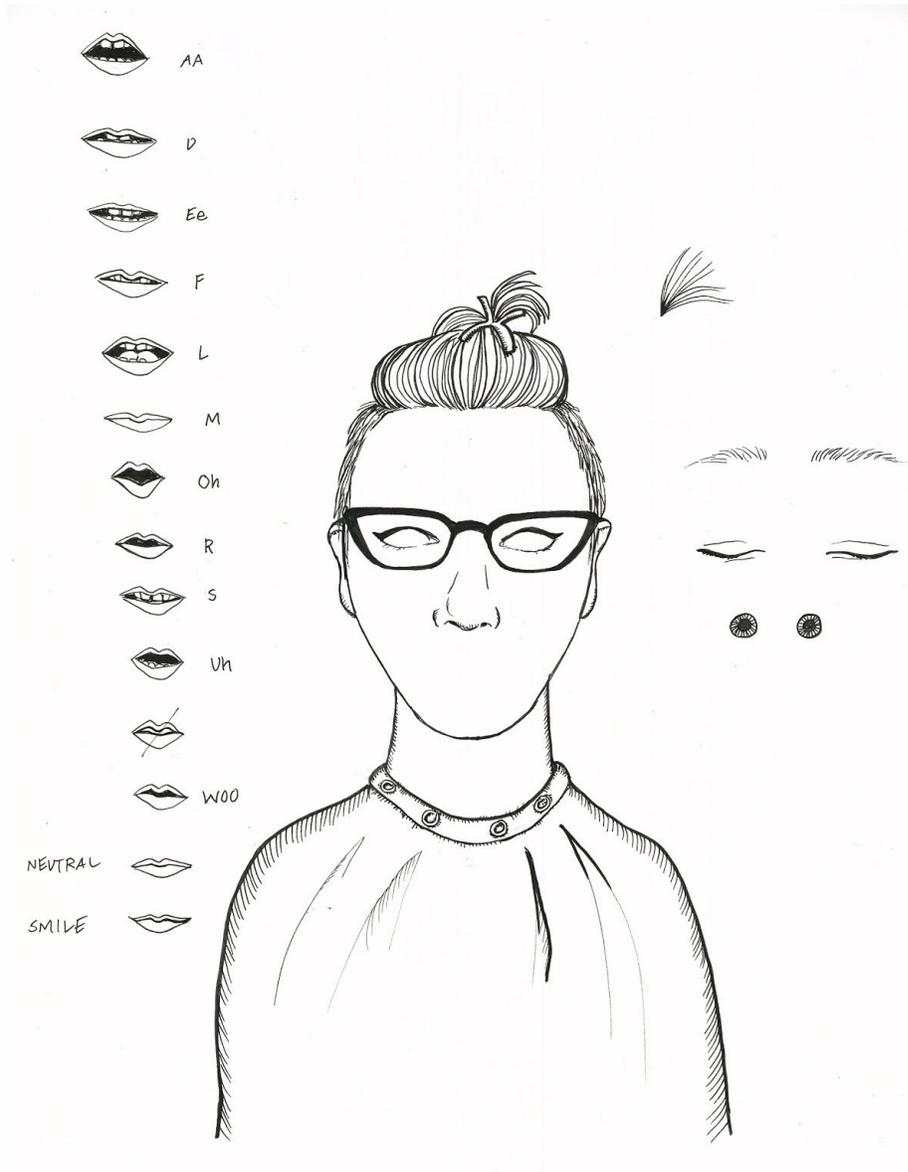
Midway through the project, however, a shift in my narrative developed after receiving feedback from a panel of Stamps professors. Based upon their intrigue with the past/present dynamic and the context in which I heard Jennifer's story in reality (at the salon), I inserted myself into the narrative. The addition of my character required me to re-record Jennifer's audio elements, and to frame her flashback anecdotes within a reenactment of our conversation at the salon. Although more complex, this new narrative structure made it easier to control the project and added an endearing, personal quality that I had hoped for.

B. Animation

The music and audio narration were synced to animated compositions rendered in *Adobe After Effects*. The graphics were first drawn in pencil, inked, scanned, and edited in *Adobe Photoshop*. Most characters were created in layers so that their facial features and limbs could move independently. I discovered how to create walk cycles through tutorials, patience, and trial and error, documenting my experiments in a Wordpress blog. Walk cycles involved designing each limb to move independently and to rotate on a specially-positioned anchorpoint, using eight various body positions. Additional motion effects were created through puppet-pinning techniques, motion-paths, and basic keyframe positioning.

In addition to learning how to create walk cycles, I discovered how to use *Character Animator* to generate talking sequences. First, puppets with various facial layers were created in *Adobe Photoshop*. This involved creating layers of opened and closed eyes, eyebrows, heads, torsos, and the following mouth shapes: Neutral, Smile, Oh, Ah, Ff, Woo, Sh, Ee, Uh, D, L, M, R, S.

Next, lip sync tracks were adapted from vocal tracks through a software setting in Character Animator that assigns the mouth shapes automatically. Corrections were made manually by adjusting the duration of any problematic layers. Finally, using facial tracking technology and a webcam, I performed and recorded the facial expressions of the scenes to my liking.



Ink drawing on bristol of talking puppet. All elements were imported into Adobe Photoshop and saved as separate layers.

C. Video Editing

Finally, I acquainted myself with *Adobe Premiere Pro* in order to compile all of the animation and sound into a single, cohesive composition. Fortunately, I had created a scene list of the various *After Effects* compositions (and their graphic elements) which helped me stay organized during the editing process. This was quite practical, since I'd often make animation adjustments in *After Effects* as I edited in *Premiere*. Additionally, the musical score, sound effects, and narration were placed into a single timeline and balanced together. And at this final stage of my project, I incorporated video and audio transitions, using fades and dissolves to alter the pacing and mood of my completed film.

IV. Creative Work

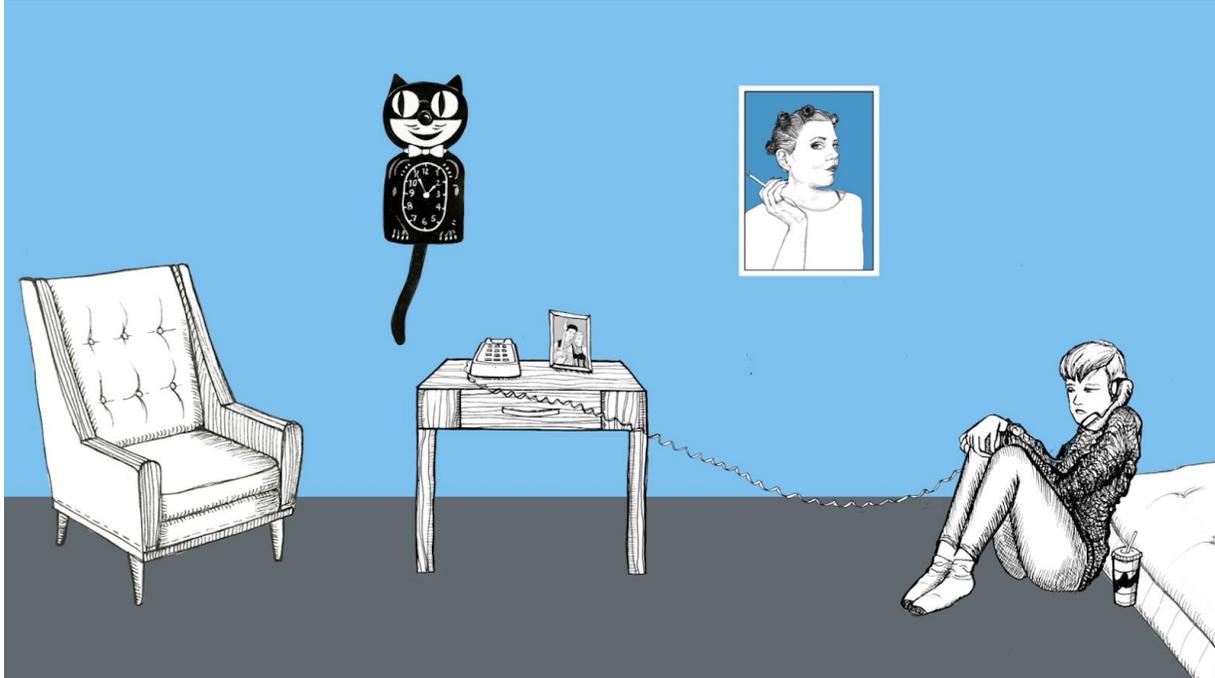
My 1-2-3-4 Months with Dee Dee Ramone was screened at The Michigan Theatre on Thursday, April 12, 2018 in front of an audience comprised of Stamps students and faculty, alumni, and the general public. Additionally, it was exhibited at the Stamps Gallery on a looping widescreen TV monitor, from April 13th-28th. At six minutes total running time, *1-2-3-4* humorously examines a middle-aged woman's complicated relationship with her past. Over the course of a salon appointment, *My 1-2-3-4* transitions between 1993 and 2015 as Jennifer confesses to her stylist friend the perils of dating a rockstar.

The color palettes in *My 1-2-3-4* effectively distinguish the past from the present. Cool-toned, mostly monochromatic flashback vignettes connote a somber, dreamlike atmosphere that contrast with the cheery warm palette of the present. All scenes are unified by expressive black

comic-style ink drawing that effectively mirror the emotional tone through varying degrees of hatching and stippling. The degree of negative space in each composition may suggest to viewers the gaps in Jennifer's memory, given that focus drawn specifically to the action at hand; however it remains unclear whether the scenes are her actual memory or her stylist's imagination.



Heavily hatched black and white ink graphics contrasted against colorful fields of largely negative space.



Cool-toned flashback of Jennifer's sparsely furnished Chelsea Hotel room. In moments of loneliness, Dee Dee is represented only by a framed photo on the table.

Two storytelling structures are apparent in the film. The flashback scenes commence with a point of conflict in the past, and explore other odd encounters leading up to it while the present-day scenes progress chronologically without incident. It is apparent in the present-day scenes that Jennifer's character has matured over the years, and has retained a sense of humor about her past. This conveys that the experience itself and the passing of time have incited personal growth. However, viewers will note that Jennifer's character prefers to keep her hair much the same way that she wore it when she was young, signifying that she has retained at least some of her rebellious tendencies and connections to her youth despite the passing of time.

Further, there are several instances where it seems that Jennifer's character is speaking directly to the viewer, when in fact she is talking to her stylist. Thus, the viewer witnesses the conversation from the perspective of the mirror. Despite the humor, there is a level of realism here, as conversations in a salon setting are seldom face-to-face. The rapport between the two women indicate that their friendship exists beyond the salon and contrasts with the turbulent relationship they're discussing. This stable relationship in the present may provide viewers with some closure about the situation, despite not learning the entire story, and knowing that Jennifer's breakup with Dee Dee is imminent.



Example of talking sequence that utilized facial tracking software in *Adobe Character Animator*. Facial features and head movements were performed by myself and recorded using a webcam.

V. Conclusion

Going forward, I will be working toward securing the rights to the Ramones song I placed in my film's title sequence, so that I may legally exhibit it outside the university. If I don't succeed in obtaining the rights, I have an alternate selection of music reserved as backup. I am fortunate that so many friends and family were willing to donate their musical talents toward my film. Their collaboration added another personal element to my project that made it all the more enjoyable to work on.

In the meantime, I will continue working on *My 1-2-3-4 Months with Dee Dee Ramone*, and plan to create b-roll footage, new camera angles, and further develop the background scenes. The narration needs a little breathing room at times, so I shall address that as well. Most importantly, I'd like to share this film with other audiences and hope that it may attract opportunities to animate other memoirs. I truly enjoyed the challenges of working with biographical content, and learned a lot from this multimedia project. Perhaps I'll animate my *own* memoir about going to art school in my forties!

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