

Senior Thesis for “Dustin the Tiger”.

Duncan Reitz. Wednesday, April 24th, 2019. 11:56pm.

Introduction.

I will create a semi-autobiographical comic about a white tiger named Dustin. More specifically, this is a depressed white tiger attempting to develop coping skills. Standing in his way, however, is his major trigger: a verbally abusive koala named Jojo. Non-Suicidal Self-Injury (NSSI), better known as “Self Harm”, is a major influence in this particular story, although it is somewhat subtle, taking the form of shape-shifting stripes. These stripes mimic my own self-harm scars from 2016. Dustin’s behavior is namely based off my own experiences with self harm and other aspects of depression, but his struggles could be applicable to other depressed people, too.

-Problem Statement.

My intent for this comic is to provide an approachable way to talk about these issues through the use of anthropomorphic animals. I choose animals as characters because their behavior, either real or metaphorical, can show humorous parallels with human behavior (i.e. koalas spend most of their days sleeping due to a plant in their diet, whereas human stoners get high off a specific plant that makes them lethargic). Likewise, there can also be hilarious contradictions to their expected behaviors (i.e. the koala being a menace towards a tiger, the latter supposedly being an apex predator). Hopefully, other depressed folks will find some merit to reading this, whether it’s motivation to get treatment, or just a good laugh. Other than that, I’d recommend this to anyone who likes stories with surrealistic aspects (i.e. foul-mouthed drinking animals, shape-shifting stripes) and people who over 18.

Contextual Discussion.

-Past Fictional Works of a Similar Nature.

¹“Maus” by Art Spiegelman is a good example of anthropomorphized animals for adult-oriented narratives. As such, “Maus” is a very famous graphic novel, so there could be visual as well as narrative inspiration. Compositionally speaking, the panels in “Maus” could go into one of two different ways. For a great deal of the dialogue, including

¹ Art Spiegelman. *Prisoner on the Hell Planet: A Case History*. In *The Complete Maus*. Pantheon Books, 1996, 1-296.

scenes in Aushwitz, the panels were very straight and grid-like. In fact, said panels were almost symmetrical, depending on the page. On the other hand, the composition of the panels on other pages could be quite wild. For instance, on page 104 (which showed “Prisoner on the Hell Planet”) Vladek Spiegelman is shown bawling on top on the casket of his late wife, Anja. The casket itself is heavily foreshortened, and extends outside the panel, and into a different one. This distortion makes the scene all the more dramatic.



The edge of Anja's casket enters a different frame
in *Prisoner on the Hell Planet: A Case History* by
Art Spiegelman, in page 104 of
The Complete Maus.

²¹I also read “Squirrel seeks Chipmunk” by David Sedaris. The reasons for this book selection was my tone during my presentation of in-progress work (dry, with humorous aspects addressed stoically, like Sedaris himself), and the various ways the animals were personified. Upon reading this, I found out the animals’ interpersonal relationships were not 100% like real human relationships, or 100% like real animal relationships, but rather a blend of both.

² David Sedaris. *Squirrel seeks Chipmunk*. Little, Brown, and Company, 1-159.

³For instance, in the last story of “Squirrel seeks Chipmunk”: “The Grieving Owl”, (p. 140-159) the owl described his thought process when killing an animal for food. His thought process was not that of a cold-blooded killer, but rather someone dealing with an unpleasant job. In fact, he would frequently spare his quarry, provided that they could share an impressive fact with him.

⁴After finishing “Maus” and “Squirrel seeks “Chipmunk”, I sought out additional anthropomorphic narratives for research. “Unconditional” and “Cruelty” by Rukis have good character development, and I was emotionally invested while reading them. The heated discussions between the main two characters (a gay couple) is a major driving force within the plot. That is, Reis (a malamute/man/wolf) tries to keep Marcus (a man/fennec fox) out of trouble due to a watchdog personality, while failing to address his own problems until it is too late. Marcus is less protective and more carefree on the outside, but shows that on the inside, he’s scared for himself and Reis.

The humor in this comic is also similar to my vision for “Dustin the Tiger”. That is, it is stoic and in small doses, but when something funny is said, it packs a punch. For instance, in “Unconditional”, a gay rights activist group called “FERAL” protests a homophobic Pastor named Jameson Bauer (a man/lion).



Frame from page 36
in *Unconditional* by
Rukis.

³ Rukis. *Unconditional*. FurPlanet, 1-66.

⁴ Rukis. *Cruelty*. FurPlanet, 1-44

When Bauer refuses to have a dialogue with Marcus, one of Marcus' friends (a man/cross fox) taunts, "What're you waiting for kitten? Is god camera shy?"

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That is not to say "Cruelty" and "Unconditional" are perfect comic examples. There's underground comics, and then there's underground comics. I would not compare either of Rukis' stories to "Maus", simply because the storytelling is more verbal than visual. That is, the paneling in "Unconditional" and "Cruelty" seem more ambiguous and dialogue-focused, whereas the paneling in "Maus" seems more intentional. Still, I like the drawing style used for the characters in "Unconditional" and "Cruelty", and there are definitely rich facial expressions. Therefore, while I doubt that either "Unconditional" or "Cruelty" are comics that my graphic narrative Professor would recommend (I don't think she'd hate them, though), I will list them as sources.



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Different angles of the characters in *And Then Reality Kicks In* (pages 75, 82, 85) by Gilbert Hernandez.

⁵ Gilbert Hernandez. *And Then Reality Kicks In*. In *The Hernandez Brothers New Stories Love and Rockets*. Seattle, WA: Fantagraphics Books, 2011, 71-85.

Speaking of underground comics, the narrative I read most recently was “And Then Reality Kicks In”, by Gilbert Hernandez. In this chapter from *The Hernandez Brothers New Stories Love and Rockets*, the two main characters are having a deep intellectual conversation. Subjects relating to Atheism, struggles of their creative careers (acting and poetry), and what the future could behold are the focus of this dialogue. However, the dialogue itself is not the only thing to focus on in this story. Rather, the shifting positions of the two characters results in a dynamic variety of compositions and perspectives. For instance, in many frames they are walking next to each other while talking. However, the characters alternate between that and facing away from each other, walking away from each other, standing from birds’ eye view, and then facing directly towards each other in a head shot at the final frame. Even though this comic is technically not in the “action” category (i.e. there’s no fist fights, car chases, or explosions), this comic seems to be action-packed due to the wide variety of alternating poses and angles.

-Secondhand Research.

A good question regarding the dynamic between Jojo the Koala and Dustin the Tiger would be “What is the correlation between bullying and self-harm?”. To answer this, I read the article “Bullying victimisation and risk of self harm in early adolescence: longitudinal cohort study”, by Helen L. Fisher, MRC. In this study, Fisher would interview both children around age 12, as well as their mothers about the child’s experience with bullying. As such, the mothers would also be asked if their children deliberately harmed themselves as a coping mechanism, and if said children have ever attempted suicide. Questions regarding self harm and suicide were not brought up to the children, due to unspecified ethical concerns. To minimize the confusion between emotional damage caused by bullying and damage caused by familial factors (i.e. parent/guardian abuse, genetics), Fisher’s study only focused on children who were twins.

The findings showed that, out of the children in the study who have self-harmed, 56% were victims of some form of bullying. Likewise, the twins who were bullied were more likely to self-harm than their non-bullied twin sibling. Therefore, bullying can certainly be a contributing factor to self-harm, but it is far from the ONLY factor. Other factors would include mental disorders such as depression, borderline personality characteristics, or conduct disorder. As such, a dysfunctional home environment could also be partially to blame. Besides, sometimes the order is reversed. The child may already be self-harming due to emotions of worthlessness, and then emotional/behavioral problems could make them a target of bullying. Nevertheless, Fisher asserts

that while she has nothing against anti-bullying programs, children and teens should also be taught healthy alternatives to their harmful coping mechanisms (i.e. exercise is much healthier than self-cutting.)

-Firsthand Research.

My main method of primary research was drawing and photographing animals from real life. These were at places such as the Toledo Zoo on October 27th, 2018, as well as La Specola during Late Spring 2018. Naturally, the animal I focused on was the tiger. However, I also made sure to make records of some of the other animals as well, such as the elephants and the great apes.

Another example of primary research I did was anonymous online interviews with former self harmers. It was interesting to compare and contrast our struggles with that bad habit. For instance, while I've never struggled with substance abuse, one of the anonymous interviewees did. At the end, when I asked about the advice they'd recommend to current self-harmers, both of them recommended therapy and/or antidepressants. One my interviewees also added that taking up fun hobbies have helped her cope. That was a major breakthrough for me, because that inspired me to depict Dustin the Tiger starting up a new hobby as an alternative coping mechanism. This newer hobby is weightlifting, something which I myself am trying to do more often.

Methodology.

"Dustin the Tiger" went through some drastic changes ever since it was first conceived. Originally, I had meant for the project to be an anthropomorphized satire of a former roommate, who I felt was not very bright. This roommate would be represented by Chico the Cheetah, whereas Dustin the Tiger would represent me. However, upon discussing this with my former sophomore review instructor, Susan Hoge, she suggested I take a different path. Instead of simply using it to ridicule this old roommate, I should make something that's more meaningful, more introspective. Reason being, the work ridiculing others would be selling myself short, no matter how funny
the ending result was.

That conversation with Hoge inspired me to focus a great deal more on Dustins' struggles with depression and self harm, which were based my struggles with those things. I anticipated that it would be a challenge, seeing as I find myself extremely boring to write about. However, with no challenge there can be no growth, so I decided to take the challenge on. As part of the introspective process, I intend to make his voice

⁶ "Potential Topics for Integrative Project, ARTDES 498 (003)." E-mail to Susan Hoge. May 14, 2018.

similar to mine when he narrates the story. This will mainly be done by the heavy use of curse words compared to the other characters (with the exception of Nodachi the wolf), and a dry sense of humor.

Originally, pretty much all of the characters seemed to have mannerisms similar to my own. That is dry, but nevertheless sophomoric humor, as well as similar sayings (i.e. "Damn Straight", "Fuckin' A!"). An example of this was when the zookeepers discussed Dustin's increasingly depressed behavior. Originally, I had planned for one of them to joke, "What, you think we gotta put Dustin on Prozac or give him a nightlight?". Following that, the other zookeeper would laugh, "Who the Fuck knows?". However, when she read the storyboards, my sister Natalie Reitz insisted that in order to make each of the characters distinctive, they should speak differently. That way, even if some of the supporting characters came across as bland, it would help convey that Dustin was the main character because he would stand out from the rest. Therefore, the dialogue between the two zookeepers that ended up being shown was more basic, and without any jokes.

Speaking of characters' mannerisms, the main reason Dustin was chosen to be a tiger was because my self harm scars slightly remind me of stripes. Therefore, giving the titular character stripes that changed to emulate self-harm scars did not seem like a huge stretch. Had I self-burned instead (as some self harmers do), perhaps a cheetah, a leopard, or a jaguar would have been appropriate personas. The spots on those animals could have potentially emulated burn marks from a lighter or a cigarette. However, when I self-harmed; I tended to stick with self-cutting, not self-burning. Reason being, I was always a very hairy guy, even in High School. Therefore, I figured that if I was to self-burn, then there would be a risk that the flames would spread and engulf my whole body. Even at my most depressed, that was not a risk I was willing to take.

Execution-wise, storyboarding took up most of the first semester of the Integrative project. This cut down on the time dedicated for creating the final pages. Therefore, the original idea for creating 30-34⁷ pages was abandoned. Instead, I settled on showing 10 finished pages in the IP Exhibition. I chose to display pages that I felt were most relevant to the plot as a whole. That is, I chose to focus on some of the more defining moments of the story, such as when Dustin first received his stripes.

⁷ Fisher, Helen L., MRC. "Bullying Victimization and Risk of Self Harm in Early Adolescence: Longitudinal Cohort Study." *BMJ*, no. 344 (April 26, 2012). Accessed January 28, 2019. <https://www.bmj.com/content/344/bmj.e2683>.

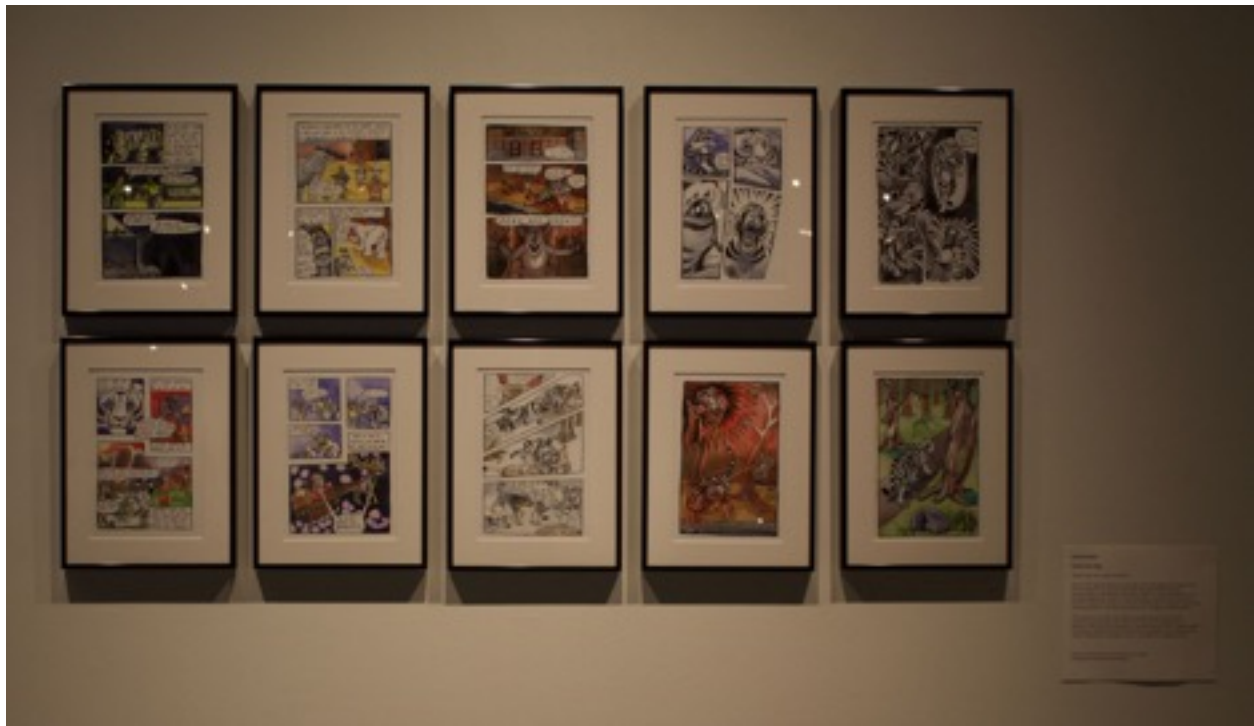
Creative Work.

The resulting 10 pages showed some of the more important scenes in the narrative of “Dustin the Tiger”. Some of these pages, of course, showed Dustin’s stripes deforming in sadness. However, there were also scenes of him trying to treat his depressive state, such as when he decided to exercise with the group called “Animal Giants. Likewise, there was a scene showing a flashback to a time preceding the stripes’ transformation. This was when Jojo the Koala vigorously screamed at Dustin for being late for a get-together. Dustin showed self-defeating thoughts during this ordeal in a thought bubble, which read “I’m such a shirking shit”.

A major supporting character, a wolf named Nodachi, was also shown in these pages. In fact, of all the characters in the pages, he was probably given the most attention. Reason being was that he was given the most dialogue, which revealed his paradoxical nature. That is, while Nodachi came across as a bombastic and misanthropic drunkard; he was also supportive when Dustin had a bad day. Dustin’s dialogue, on the other hand, was more scarce, and generally used for narration during the exhibition. In reality though, Dustin was meant to have a slight sense of humor, albeit deadpan and self-deprecating. Therefore, when I continue adding additional pages during my own time, I will try to fill in any gaps that could have caused confusion about Dustin’s character.

For the sake of consistency, the same process used for the pages shown in the exhibition will be used for any future pages. Each of the displayed pages were done using watercolor on watercolor paper. The primary reason was that I preferred traditional media over digital media. However, I also wanted certain colors to pop during certain scenes (i.e. blue for the subtly sad scenes, red during scenes of anger, and grayscale for when Dustin receives his stripes [arguably the most surreal/chaotic scene in the story]). Likewise, while watercolor is a wet medium, it dries faster than acrylic or oil paints. Once the watercolor dried, I completed the illustrations using Higgins Black Magic Ink for outlines. Unfortunately, watercolor paper tends to wrinkle after the paint dries. Therefore, it was decided that I display digital prints of the pages, instead of the originals themselves.

For the senior show, each of these pages were mounted in black metal frames. They were arranged in 2 rows, which consisted of 5 frames each. During critiques, a fellow student pointed out that a booklet may be more appropriate, but I rejected his suggestion. I felt that frames would make an incomplete narrative seem more complete, whereas a booklet of 10 pages would not achieve that effect. Besides, having the pages hung up on the wall could be seen as previews to the rest of the story, almost like movie posters.



Above: the printed, finished pages of “Dustin the Tiger, hung in black metal frames.

Below: the digital files for said pages.







Conclusion.

Due to time constraints, the original amount of pages planned (somewhere between 30-34) were not able to be finished. Instead, I settled for 10 finished pages, which were framed for the exhibition. After the exhibition, I intend to continue working on this comic, giving it the remaining pages to fill any plot holes, thus completing the story. At that point, it will be more clear as to whether or not “Dustin the Tiger” fulfilled its purpose: depicting the struggles of depression in a comic book.

Once I consider it finished, I hope to send “Dustin the Tiger” to a publisher. I specifically would prefer professional publishing over self-publishing, because I want this comic to be as widely distributed as possible. Through doing the work to get the pages I have, I still do not consider this the best story I’ve ever written. One of the reasons behind this is that I do not have a great deal of writing experience. However, perhaps it could be improved if I took creative writing courses at Washtenaw Community College. That is, after I graduate from my current college: the Stamps School of Art and Design. Another issue is that I still have a small nagging feeling that I am boring to write about, and that by doing introspective work, I come across as pretentious. However, I am very happy with the development of the main character (Dustin) and the illustrations. As a result of my current satisfaction, I am not as averse to making introspective work as I used to be.

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