

ESHELMAN

BY DANNY DREW

INTRODUCTION

You are awoken at 4:00 AM. There are two burley men standing in front of you. They tell you that they're going to take you away. You're being sent to boarding school. One of them pulls you out of bed as you catch a glimpse of the other demanding your parents stay in their room. You are thrown into a van. They tell you that it won't be so bad. But ahead of you lies an 18-hour 2-day-long car ride, and beyond that, a dangerous cult completely isolated from the rest of society. This is how a child is taken to The Elan School. I will be creating a graphic novel in order to explore the psychological implications of cult-like rehabilitation programs and boarding schools, and to humanize and relate to the people affected. This project is important because it challenges the alienation of individual participants in a cult, and it confronts people with the impossible circumstances of some of these programs.

THE DISSEMINATION OF THE REHABILITATION CULT

The progenitor of the Rehabilitation Cult model is Synanon, led by Charles Dederich. Synanon started as a temporary drug recovery program that used confrontational therapeutic practices. Soon after, Dederich wouldn't allow members to leave. In his book *From Miracle to Madness*¹, investigative journalist Paul Morantz describes their main course of therapy, and of

¹ Morantz, Paul. *From Miracle to Madness: the True Story of Charles Dederich and Synanon: the Definitive History of Charles Dederich and His Heralded Drug Rehabilitation Center That Spiraled into Paranoia and Violence and Spawned Generations of Destructive Cults: Another Culture Gone with the Wind*. Pacific Palisades, CA: Cresta Publications, 2015.

social control, called “The Game”. In The Game, members of Synanon sat in a circle. They each took a turn to scream at someone else in the circle. They encouraged members to humiliate each other and tear them down to their deepest insecurities.

Synanon soon developed stranger practices such as forced vasectomies and marriage rearrangement, where couples were broken up and given new partners. This could have been an attempt to, in the parlance of Elan, prevent people from making “contracts”, or any social bonds that could allow them to incubate antithetical ideals. Synanon then became an alternative community, beginning to shut out the outside world. Eventually it went off the rails. Synanon became the Church of Synanon, Morantz was nearly assassinated by way of a packaged-and-mailed rattlesnake. Synanon was associated with disappearances and their secrets were being revealed. So this once-reveled facility completely fell apart.

After the collapse, Father William B. O’Brien, a supporter of Synanon, founded a new program called Daytop Village. Daytop Village was a somewhat milder version of Synanon, though they still used confrontation therapy. One day, a man named Joe Ricci was caught trying to jack cars. Because he had family in high places, he was given the option to go to Daytop instead of prison. When he arrived, he took in all the practices Synanon had passed down to Daytop. Ricci never graduated, despite what he often claimed. Later, Ricci would lie and say he overcame heroin addiction to establish bona fides for founding a new rehabilitation cult—one for children².

² Curley, Maura. *Duck in a Raincoat: an Unauthorized Portrait of Joe Ricci*. Marblehead, MA: Menkie Press, 1991.

Ricci saw bottomless wealth in this endeavor. Originally from New York, he moved his operation to Maine, where the mental health laws were laxer. With the help of supposedly-credible psychiatrist Gerald Davidson, he founded The Elan School, a “boarding school”/behavior modification program/cult. By the time he was thirty, Ricci was a millionaire.

THE METHODOLOGY OF ELAN AND OTHER CULTS

There are well-known, tried-and-true methods of cult brainwashing. Julia Layton explains that recruitment first comes from targeting those in distress and employing deception and manipulation. You look for someone who is desperate, and you give them an out. In the case of the People’s Temple, Jim Jones traveled, targeting the poor and the oppressed and giving them hope with his rousing socialist sermons. Elan, however, targets the parents of troubled children. Elan’s brochures advertise what looked like a summer camp, with kayaking and white water rafting. Its literature claims an 80 percent success rate with most graduates living healthy, productive lives. If you’re a parent who’s lost all control, who’s seeing their child spiral towards rock bottom, you see that light of hope and you cling to it. The problem is that there are no kayaks, no white water rapids. Curley points out that their numbers differ from the findings of a survey that claim, (of 71 former students polled) 17 percent of students were in jail, 59 percent were “living marginal lives” of petty crime, unemployment, or drug abuse, and only 23 percent were working or in school. Through this deception, Elan successfully baits desperate parents. It’s an interesting departure, as those who are targeted are not those who are recruited, which necessitates the indoctrination process to be rigorous, nearly flawless. Layton details several thought reform tactics—isolation, induced dependency, and dread.

When a child enters Elan, it will be several months before they are permitted to communicate with their parents. Even then, all letters are proofread by staff and all phone calls are monitored. This way, a child cannot alert their parents to the deception being performed. No system is perfect, though, and the message sometimes gets through. The Elan administration cleverly reverses the situation by telling parents in advance, “your kid is going to say literally anything he can think of to try to manipulate you.” This again plays off of credibility. Who will you trust—a successful businessman and a respected psychiatrist, or your kid who in most cases has lied to you dozens of times before you sent them there? So when parents hear about the torturous punishments and taxing labor, they’re already groomed to think their kids are just lying to get back onto the streets. To add to this isolation, Elan is located deep within the woods of Maine, miles away from anything. Isolation plays an important role in Erving Goffman’s theory of total institutions³. Due to the isolation, members are robbed of their individuality and begin to embody their role in the institution.

The foundation of this organization really lies in its structure. In Elan, children are separated into two groups: Strength and Non-strength. Upon entering the program with no psychological evaluation, you are given a non-strength position, usually cleaning floors or bathrooms. A student moves through the ranks based on their behavior and conformity. But almost every maintenance job was occupied by a student, which allowed the program to operate with virtually no overhead. As you rose to a strength position, you were allowed more privileges. Such privileges include exercising, growing facial hair, and seeing your parents for

³ Goffman, Erving. *Asylums: Essays on the Social Situation of Mental Patients and Inmates*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1968.

one day. The dichotomous structure of Elan is reminiscent of the Stanford Prison Experiment⁴, in which young volunteers were randomly assigned to be either guards or prisoners. Philip Zimbardo elaborates his discovery that throughout the six days the experiment ran—before it was aborted for ethical reasons—the guards became increasingly brutal, some even sadistic, while the prisoners began to lose their individualism and internalize their role. Sure enough, the students in positions of strength at Elan often act ruthlessly. The ingenious psychological manipulation of Elan, though, is to take that power dynamic Zimbardo sets up, and incentivize it. Imagine how different the experiment would play out if the prisoners could be promoted and the guards could be, in Elan parlance, “shot down”. Whether it takes days or weeks or months of scrubbing floors on your hands and knees, you will eventually come to realize your best move is to buy into the system. And you will carry out a surprising degree of cruelty, because if you don’t you know you’ll be on the receiving end.

And the wrong end of Elan’s cruelty is not a place anyone wants to be. Elan has a strong foundation of terror, because the potential punishments are essentially torture. The list could go on for pages, but there’s three main punishments that show up over and over: general meetings, the ring, the corner. A general meeting is the most common punishment. If you’re caught doing something you shouldn’t have been doing, you’d be reported by another student. Usually the next day, you would stand in front of the entire house while groups of students, four at a time, would rotate in, standing just feet away from you and screaming at you for one full minute. This would last upwards of half an hour. Things that could provoke this punishment

⁴ Zimbardo, Philip G. *The Lucifer Effect: How Good People Turn Evil*. London: Rider, 2009.

would be using the bathroom without permission, talking as a non-strength to another non-strength, or smiling.

Intended for cases in which students are being violent, but often used as punishment for extremely minor things, is the ring. During a ring, the guilty party is given boxing gloves and surrounded by screaming students on all sides. They then have to box round after round against a rotating cast of the strongest students in the house. They inevitably lose, but they will be forced back to their feet to get beaten again. In one case, in 1982, a fifteen-year-old student named Phil Williams was given a ring for complaining about chronic headaches, which the staff perceived as an excuse not to work. Williams was repeatedly beaten until he began to convulse. Shortly after, while in isolation, Williams began flopping around on the floor. Instead of calling an ambulance, staff took Williams away themselves. The nearest hospital was 30 minutes away. Williams likely suffered an aneurysm and died; no one was charged.

The corner rounds out the three main punishments. Essentially solitary confinement, it is used for students who repeatedly refused to comply. It's exactly what it sounds like—just a chair facing a corner. You have to sit there until you are determined to be ready to stop. All day long, you just sit in a chair facing the wall. You can only interact with one person, an assigned supervisor. Often, they will bring over a bed so you can sleep in the corner as well. There are numerous reports of students being kept in the corner for as long as six months straight. Six months of nothing but sitting still, staring at a wall. In some cases, students are allowed to come over and scream at you for a while, too, as they saw fit. Several other punishments loom over the students of Elan, creating a perfect atmosphere of fear.

The last step Elan takes is to foster dependency in its graduates. A large number of former students become staff after graduating. This is because Ricci pays these, often brainwashed, graduates far more than they could hope to make anywhere else. He also often puts them up in houses near the school, where they can live rent free. This seems kind of nice, but in reality Ricci has set up a situation in which he has complete control over his staff. If ever they were to cross him, he could easily strip them of their entire livelihood. And for a staff member to leave would be a leap of faith into a completely unfamiliar system—a working world which, due to their isolation at Elan, they have absolutely no preparation for. So they stick with what they know, with financial security and a social structure they understand. They often become the cruelest of all, now garnering dozens of rumors and complaints online ranging from sexual assault to dragging an overweight girl behind a truck.

The psychology behind Elan is similar to the psychology behind any cult. Deception, isolation, induced dependency, and dread. It exploited the psyche of a parent by offering a light in the darkness, and it exploited the psyche of a child by stripping them of their individuality right at the time they're supposed to be developing. Children are impressionable and have fewer rights; they're easier prey than that of most cults.

ARTISTIC INSPIRATION

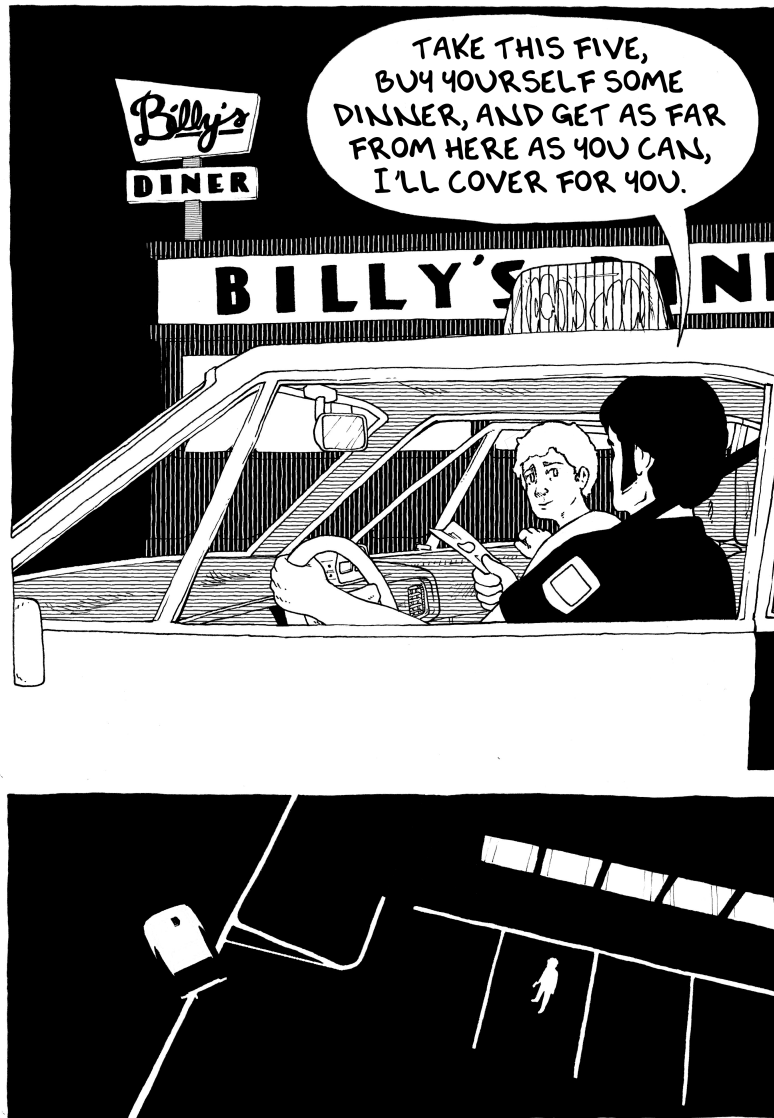
Because of the fact that I don't read a ton of graphic novels, most of my artistic inspiration comes from film. This shows mainly in the cinematographic nature of my compositions and my pacing. Compositionally, my influences include Wes Anderson and Stanley Kubrick's symmetrical and straight-on shots. Tonally and story-telling-wise, I am most strongly

influenced by the Coen brothers. This manifests in the dark nature of my subject matter mixed with moments of humor.

METHODOLOGY

I arrived at this project in late 2018. I was planning on doing a long comic whose story was an analogy for the People's Temple and the events of Jonestown. This was going to be building upon *Jones*—a pop punk album with a similar concept I had made one year prior. I began to lose interest in this project and remembered a story I had heard a while ago. In around 2012, I had listened to a 7-hour-long marathon podcast in which the host detailed his time at The Elan School in the late 90s. At the time I thought the story would make a very compelling movie or comic, but I didn't have the time, resources, or talent to produce it. In 2018, after having already written and illustrated a full length comic, I decided I was now perfectly able. So I began researching the institution in detail.

My original concept for this comic would be to have one long story with flashback vignettes as intermissions between acts. I began work on the vignettes first; all of them were true stories I had read along my research. I completed four of them; I had originally planned on a fifth one, but decided to scrap it for being too shockingly and unproductively disturbing. The four stories were either unique or exemplary of common events that took place at Elan. One was about the kid who was beaten so badly in the ring he had an aneurysm and died. One was about a girl who was publicly humiliated for waving at a boy. One was about a kid who spent so much time in the corner, she began hallucinating. And the last was about a kid who escaped and managed to convince a local police officer to help him get away.



This was most of my art practice from then until IP started. When I finally sat down to write up the longer story in the summer prior to IP, I decided it would be more interesting to incorporate the events of those vignettes into the long story instead of keeping them separate. I wrote the whole first draft of the script for the comic in a week, working on it for up to 12 hours a day. In its entirety it came out to over 16,000 words and essentially reads like a strange novella. This is an example of a spread in the script next to the final drawing.

Liam sits in a chair facing the corner of a wooden wall. Someone sits behind him with a clipboard. Liam stares as an ant climbs up the wall. "Liam!" Edward approaches from behind with a tray. On it is a bowl full of a nondescript formula. "E4." Edward hands Liam the tray. Liam turns back around to face the corner. "Edward?" "What." "This soup smells like the home." "Stop glamorizing, Liam. That's guilt." Liam continues to stare forward. The ant disappears into a crack.

7:45: Edward sets down a sponge and a bucket in front of Ryan. "You're a worker. Your job is to clean. Take these and scrub the floors. Do not ask whether or not you've cleaned enough—you haven't." Ryan starts to speak and Edward says, "Just fucking do it Ryan."

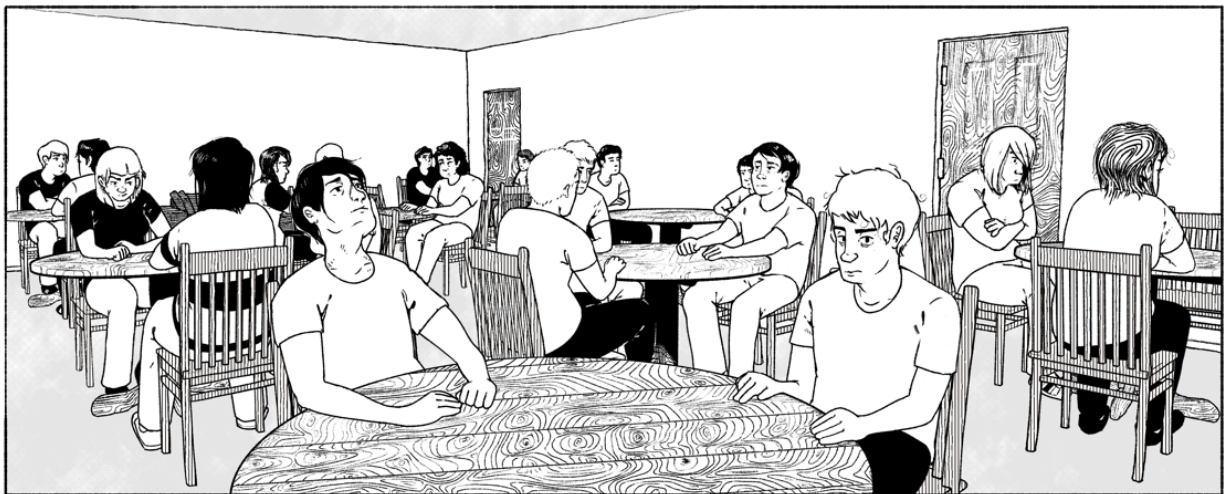


CREATIVE WORK

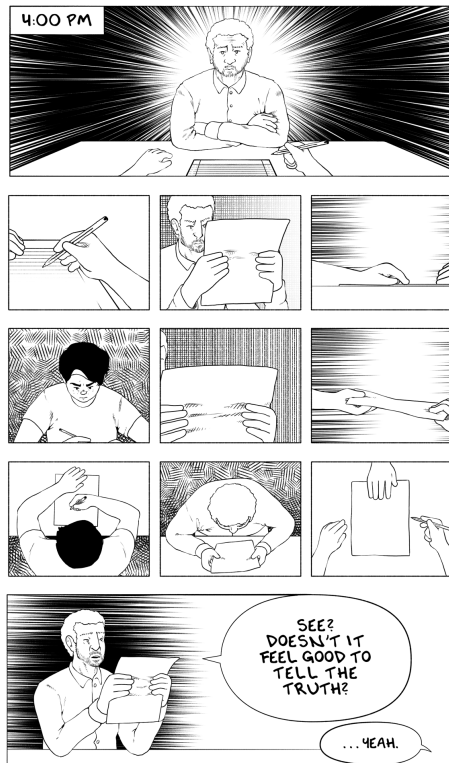
My main process is in four steps. Firstly, I wrote the script for the comic. Then I draw thumbnails—maybe 1" x 1.5" rectangles split down the center, and doodles representing the layout of each spread. After that, I take each thumbnail and use it to create a sketch of the spread. I scan that sketch and ink it in Photoshop, also adding textures, backgrounds, and text.



In cases where it would be more simple, I will leave a panel blank in my sketch. During inking, I will import an image or a rendering of a 3D model to trace. For instance, I have the entire building in which the comic takes place laid out in 3D in Google SketchUp, giving me the ability to accurately depict interesting angles for the backgrounds.



Originally, I was using a drawing tablet with Photoshop, but recently I purchased an iPad, which I use in tandem with my computer. I'll ink the sketches with my iPad and add textures, panels, and guides with my computer.



CONCLUSION

In total, my project will be a graphic novel in five acts, but for my thesis, I am only completing the prologue and the first act. This will end up being around fifty pages in total. When exhibited, I plan to have many booklets printed, stacked on a table booth with a pay-what-you-want jar next to them. I hope to also collaborate with Vault of Midnight and have them give away free copies of the prologue to build hype. I want to get this comic into as many hands as possible and spread awareness about the issues addressed within.