

Book Review

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Comics and women's mental health: Five stories.

Viljoen, Jeanne-Marie. 2025.

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ABSTRACT

Comics and women's mental health: Five stories (2025) makes an original and valuable contribution to the fields of graphic medicine and the health humanities. Through close analysis of the formal qualities of five comics, Viljoen examines how phenomenological experiences of mental health are communicated visually, enabling empathy and understanding to emerge. The book demonstrates the significance of graphic medicine in fostering a deeper understanding of women's lived mental health experiences through embodied and affective engagement between comic creators and readers/viewers.

Keywords: Graphic medicine, women's mental health, embodiment, art in health, affect studies.

Individuals facing mental health challenges are commonly misunderstood and dehumanised due to stigma and stereotypes on the one hand and the dominance of the biomedical model on the other. The book titled *Comics and women's mental health: Five stories*, written by Jeanne-Marie Viljoen (2025), directly challenges these reductive frameworks by demonstrating how graphic medicine acts as an effective communication tool. Through examining the formal qualities of five comics, created by five different women, Viljoen demonstrates how visual texts might bridge the gap in understanding by giving visual form to the lived experience of mental health challenges, which are often perceived as inarticulable and invisible to others. Throughout the book, Viljoen unpacks how each of the chosen comics communicates the lived experiences of individuals with mental health challenges, enabling the creators and their audiences to gain deeper insights into the phenomenological aspects of mental health experiences.

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The first chapter not only establishes the importance and value of graphic medicine as an interdisciplinary methodology for expressing, interpreting, and understanding the phenomenological aspects of women's mental health experiences, it also foregrounds the important and valuable contributions of the book itself. Among the contributions the book makes, are that it discusses comics created in the twenty-first century, which have not yet been canonised. The comics discussed are Chipkin and Tavassoli's (2017) *Eyes too dry*; Nagata and Sentar's (2017) *My lesbian experience with loneliness*; Wong's (2019) *Dear Scarlet*; Feder's (2020) *Dancing at the pity party* and Thornton's (2014) *Hoax psychosis blues*. Each of these comics required different methods of analysis in order to examine their different visual forms, methods of production and literary content. Another significant contribution lies in Viljoen's bringing to light of experiences and perspectives associated with marginalisation and intersectional identities. Viljoen purposefully chose specific comics that showcase various women's perspectives and experiences informed by their different sexualities, genders, cultures, geographical locations, ages and authorial positions. By including diverse perspectives, Viljoen investigates how mental illness, trauma and disability are understood and treated in different contexts by looking at each comic on a case-by-case basis and how they may advance thinking about mental health. In addition, the book highlights the therapeutic and health benefits of comics. By analysing the selected comics' formal qualities through an interdisciplinary lens, Viljoen demonstrates how comics can function as narrative representations of mental health experiences, and as meaningful tools for understanding mental wellbeing and care.

The second chapter is a theoretical framework, wherein Viljoen introduces and discusses art in health, affect studies, and embodiment. In tandem, these scholarly frameworks underpin the analyses presented in the subsequent chapters. Chapters three to seven discuss the five comics chosen by Viljoen, carefully dissecting them one by one, chapter by chapter. Viljoen's analyses foreground how hand-drawn comics create an embodied and affective experience for both the creator and the reader/viewer. In Chapter three Viljoen demonstrates how Chipkin and Tavassoli's (2017) *Eyes too dry* provides insight into the depression and disassociation experienced by the creators within their queer friendship. The discussion in Chapter four focuses on Kabi Nagata's (2017) manga memoir titled *Lesbian loneliness*, which artistically expresses her experience of loneliness. Chapter five discusses Wong's (2019) graphic memoir titled *Dear Scarlet* and how it effectively communicates her experience of postpartum depression and the isolation and stillness marking that experience. Feder's *Dancing at the pity party* is the focus of Chapter six, in which Viljoen demonstrates how the graphic memoir illustrates the creator's experience of grief due to the death of her mother. Chapter seven discusses the last comic created by Thornton (2014) titled *Hoax psychosis blues*, which highlights the creator's brother's experience of schizophrenia. One recurring theme that Viljoen highlights throughout the chapters is how the creators express their experience of time, for example, in the form of 'queer time' in Chapter three, 'women's time' and 'crib time' during depression in Chapter four, and a schizophrenic experience of time which is neuroscientifically understood as a 'time disorder' in Chapter seven.

In the concluding chapter, Viljoen synthesises the book's key insights, reaffirming the value of graphic medicine as an effective communicative form that encourages embodied and affective experiences for both creators and viewers/readers, while also highlighting its significant contributions to the health humanities. As a woman, reading another woman's (i.e. Viljoen's) interpretation of other women's experiences expressed through comics (i.e. Chipkin, Tavassoli, Nagata, Sentar, Wong, Feder and Thornton), I can appreciate Viljoen's insider insights into how mental illness may affect women in different ways. One limitation is that readers without prior understanding of diverse scholarship associated with, for example, art in health, affect studies, and comic studies, may not get as much out of engaging with the book as those who have. Overall, however, the book offers various valuable contributions to the field of comic studies and graphic medicine, specifically.

REFERENCES

Viljoen, J. 2025. *Comics and women's mental health: Five stories*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.