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Teaching the Graphic Novel

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Autobifictionalography: Making Do in Lynda Barry's *One Hundred Demons*

Along the far left margin of the copyright page to Lynda Barry's *One Hundred Demons*, hand-scrawled uppercase print advises, "Please note: This is a work of autobifictionalography." Just beneath the table of contents, this word appears again in red, curly cursive lettering on torn green paper; Barry's looping letters look approachable and greeting-card friendly. Careful hand printing on another paper scrap asks the question, "Are these stories true or false?" with red check marks in each box to imply that these stories, perhaps all stories, are a little of both. Barry proposes a postmodern critical viewpoint in a noncombative way, encouraging genuine curiosity about the relation of autobiography to fiction and of storytelling to comics. She asks how well any written, drawn, or spoken statement represents the truth, or a truth, and she playfully complicates matters by casting a semiautobiographical Lynda as her protagonist. Further, she urges amateurs to write and illustrate work of their own, by taking up the Asian brushwork technique that inspired *Demons* in the first place—what Michel de Certeau has called "making do." Barry's combination of critical and creative inquiry—effectively demonstrating her own praxis, in an unaffected manner—makes *Demons* an excellent text for the undergraduate and graduate classroom.

Thanks to the extraordinary flexibility of this text and its potential appeal to a range of audiences, I have taught *One Hundred Demons* in a graduate seminar, *Theorizing the Picture Book*, as well as in combined graduate-undergraduate sections with a comics bent—for example, *Studies in Literary Genres: Graphic Narrative, Young Adult Literature*. For the purposes of my courses, I have categorized *Demons* as a picture book of sorts but not as a text exclusively for young readers. I believe it can be taken up by any literate reader, and in my teaching I emphasize the concepts of reading and creating “autobifictionalography” as well as DIY, or do-it-yourself, art making. My assignments have included group research and reporting on *Demons*' sociohistorical and multiethnic contexts; critical comparisons of *Demons* with contemporary graphic novels and graphic memoirs on growing up; a creative writing exercise, led by a graduate student who attended a writing workshop given by Barry; and a draw-you-demon exercise (albeit using markers rather than bamboo brushes and inkstones, given the twenty-five students in the room).

One Hundred Demons contains eighteen first-person comic strips about its protagonist's troubled childhood, chaotic adolescence, and uncertain adulthood. In the introduction and conclusion, Barry describes her creative process, with the aim of getting readers to try this hands-on method themselves. The opening panels picture a pensive woman in a knotted bandana, sitting at her drawing table and touching a bamboo brush to a blank sheet of paper (fig. 1). She is obviously a Barry surrogate: elsewhere in *Demons*, the artist appears in color photographs, wearing the same scarf and surrounded by painting supplies. Large, rounded cursive words on lined yellow legal paper, resembling a child's writing lesson, fill the page above her head: “Is it autobiography if parts of it are not true? / Is it fiction if parts of it are?” (7). In the third panel, which closes the spread, readers see that the woman has drawn a mirror image of herself sitting and pondering this metafictional conundrum. Her rounded, opaque glasses conceal her eyes and identify her just as Scott McCloud's and Joe Sacco's cartoon self-portraits erase the direct gaze. McCloud explains this stylization technique as “amplification through simplification” (*Understanding* 30), stating that “the cartoon is a vacuum into which our identity and awareness are pulled. . . . / We don't just observe the cartoon, we become it!” (36). McCloud contends that the empty-eyed, minimally detailed protagonist enables the audience to appropriate the first-person narrator's gaze or empathize readily



Figure 1. The opening panels in Lynda Barry's *One Hundred Demons* present a surrogate of the artist.

with the simply limned face. Notably, when the book shifts to the past, Barry pictures her child-self without glasses, establishing a temporal and psychological distance between the Lynda character and the audience.

It's easy to accept the self-portraits as stand-ins for the actual Barry, given the tiny, easy-to-miss disclaimers on autobifictionalography. The artist buries these disclaimers in one of her extravagant multimedia collages, which include doodles, doilies, defaced grade school photos, torn magazine images, glitter, tissue paper, pressed flowers, and other scrapbook items. Decoding this text requires close looking and careful consideration. Barry's collages, made by gluing and taping humble materials together, have a homemade aesthetic in deliberate tension with the term *autobifictionalography*. They invoke not just the one-of-a-kind artist's book but also high school yearbooks, notes passed in class, gift wrapping for special occasions, and the bindings of diaries and sketchbooks, all associated with privacy and nostalgia. Susan Stewart notes:

The space of the collection is a complex interplay of exposure and hiding, organization and the chaos of infinity. . . . [T]his filling in [of spaces like boxes, shelves, and albums] is a matter of ornamentation

and presentation in which the interior is both a model and a projection of self-fashioning. (157)

Barry tempts her readers to accept *Demons* as an album of relics from real life. But to take these seeming relics as proof of a unified artist-self, readers must overlook visible cues supplied by Barry to spark doubt.

That readers never know which autobiographical references are red herrings and which events really happened opens up a discussion of what is at stake. Does a creator require firsthand experience of a situation in order to write and draw it convincingly? Do the collage items require our belief or our suspension of disbelief, and how does their homespun quality evoke audience sympathy with the fictionalized Lynda? I usually begin class discussion from a cultural studies standpoint, reflecting on common practices of keeping diaries, journals, yearbooks, and scrapbooks and on the practice of embellishing these books with literal and figurative residue of the past. In my experience, this discussion moves to a consideration of the diary's paradoxical secrecy and perceived future audience, the semblance of intimacy *Demons* conjures for readers.

Barry's "Intro" explains the practice that resulted in *One Hundred Demons*, originally presented by Salon.com from April 2000 through January 2001. Exposition is provided by a multieyed, slimy-looking sea serpent—a demon, painted in ink wash on a lined legal pad—that rises from Hokusai-inspired waves and hovers near the artist's desk. "She was at the library when she first read about a painting exercise called, 'One Hundred Demons!'" the green-and-gray creature says. "The example she saw was a hand-scroll [from] 16th century Japan. / I can assure you it was *not* painted on yellow legal paper!" When the artist followed the painting instructions, "the demons began to come. / They were not the demon she expected" (10). Squiggly ink lizards, squid, and deep-sea fish parade in the frames around the panels. These are representative monsters, not quite the demons that populate the text. "At first they [the demons/memories] freaked her, but then she started to love watching them come out of her paint brush," the demon continues. "She hopes you will dig these demons and then pick up a paint brush and paint your own." Barry's character turns to the audience and adds, "Sincerely! Pass it on!!" (13). The shifts to second-person address here and throughout the text, combined with the collages, imply amiable one-on-one counsel. This warmth is enhanced by a how-to section, "Paint Your Demon," that offers cheerful exhortation ("Come on! Don't you want to try it?") and step-by-step instructions on

using an inkstone, inkstick, "Asian style brushes," and paper. "I like to paint on legal paper or on the classified section of the newspaper or even pages from old books!" Barry writes. "Try it! You will dig it!" (n. pag.).

The strips that follow—each focused on a key term ("Hate," "Magic," "My First Job")—flash back to the Lynda character's 1960s and 1970s youth, enabling critical conversations about memory, storytelling, and the artist's freedom to embellish or reinvent her past. These eighteen-panel sequence—comprising four spreads of four panels each, plus a one-page, two-panel closer—depict Lynda's lower-middle-class Filipino American household, including her chain-smoking, irascible mother and happy-go-lucky, bilingual grandmother. Barry's father, of Norwegian heritage, does not appear in the book, but the artist shows in words and images that her fictional alter ego does not resemble her Filipino/a relatives closely. Lynda's red hair and freckles stand out in her family, while her social awkwardness and class-based insecurities make her an outsider among the white, African American, and Asian American kids in her neighborhood.

Nearly every sequence is based loosely on a past experience and implies an adult working through of demons or anxieties that arise in childhood and continually haunt their subjects. Hit songs by the Lovin' Spoonful ("Do You Believe in Magic" [1965]) and Todd Rundgren ("Hello, It's Me" [1970]) provide a sound track for historical context, as do oblique references to the history of American and Japanese imperialism in the Philippines. Barry often uses a smell, sound, or other sensory cue to summon the protagonist's demons, much as Proust/Marcel's moment with the madeleine and linden tea brought a flood of *mémoire involontaire* (Proust 48–51). The "Common Scents" chapter opens with the admission, "I have always noticed the smell of other people's houses" (52), and develops as a meditation on home cooking, air fresheners, disinfectants, and perceptions of cleanliness based as much on racial and ethnic biases as on sensory experience.

Other sequences mine the difficult process of growing up, minus any motivational pep talk from an elder. Barry's strip "Resilience" asks, "When did I become a teenager?" (64), and lists clichéd rites of passage like a first kiss, hitchhiking, and drinking that seem inadequate to explain the complex transition from ignorance to social awareness. An expository narrative, hand-printed at the top of each panel, editorializes on trauma and self-delusion: "I cringe when people talk about the resiliency of children. It's a hope adults have about the nature of a child's inner life, that it's simple, that what can be forgotten can no longer affect us. But what is

forgetting?" (66). Expressions of hindsight stand in counterpoint to the lower portions of the panels, which picture Lynda's coded conversation with a rival in home-ec class, ostracism from junior high clique, and drunken encounters with boys.

Another strip details the "lost worlds" of childhood, like the ordinary neighborhood kickball game, never to be experienced again. While antagonistic children roll and field the classic red rubber kickball, Barry's introspective narrator wonders, "Who knows which moments of us—who we are? Some of them? All of them? The ones we never thought of as anything special? How many kickball games did I play?" (36). Through attention to Barry's backward-glancing, first-person narrative and the immediacy of the dialogue and imagery, readers gain insight into the practice of personal recollection and the complex process of balancing verbal and visual in comics storytelling.

In my courses *Theorizing the Picture Book* and *Young Adult Literature*, I assign *One Hundred Demons* because of Barry's extensive attention to childhood trauma and her appeal to media-savvy, visually sophisticated youth. At the same time, I challenge unreflective autobiographical readings or too much focus on the fictional child-teen, in favor of exploring the contemporary concepts of adolescence that Barry exposes so well. My concern is to avoid, as much as possible, a defensive attitude toward the pairing of childhood and comics as well as critical assertions that a certain childishness clings to comics readers and creators alike. I bring these concerns to class by sharing examples of these limiting arguments. For instance, McCloud protests the notion of comics as "cheap, disposable kiddie fare" (*Understanding* 3), while Peter Schjeldahl warns, "Graphic novels induce an enveloping kind of emotional identification that makes them only too congenial to adolescent narcissism, in the writing no less than in the reading" (165). Where Schjeldahl overlooks Barry entirely and recommends the self-reflexive comics of Sacco, Harvey Pekar, and Marjane Satrapi as an antidote to what he sees as adolescent navel-gazing, I note how Barry takes youth as a central concern without sentimentalizing it. *Demons'* blunt appraisal of race and class prejudice, bullying, oppression, and drug abuse serve as a corrective to concepts of adolescence as cute or stupid kids and of children as innocent or irredeemably evil. For these reasons, I establish comparisons between *Demons* and nominally autobiographical work, including Satrapi's *Persepolis* books, Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home*, and Lauren R. Weinstein's *Girl Stories*, to name a few nuanced examinations of young adult ennui.

Alternatively, I assign an essay by Melinda L. de Jesús, who argues that the "shrewd verbal-visual content of *Demons* 'capitalizes on the graphic capacities of comics to critique the colorism endemic to US racial formations'" (227). Since the Lynda character's pale skin and red hair visually differentiate her from her dark-complexioned relatives, even without much explicit mention of difference, *Demons* "refutes the idea of Filipina American 'representability'" (248) by making the family literally visible. While alert to Barry's importance in terms of women's writing and adolescence, de Jesús details *Demons'* relevance to Filipino/a American life, mestiza consciousness, hybridity, and globalization and suggests linking *Demons* to Gloria Anzaldúa's foundational *Borderlands / La Frontera*. She regards "the identity struggles Barry presents . . . as contributing to the process of Filipina/American representation and decolonization, rather than as just humorous depictions of ethnic American adolescent angst" (27–28). I ask my students—who sometimes avoid loaded topics by arguing that school, shopping, and family strife are just typical adolescent concerns—to comment on how *Demons* and other graphic novels foreground gender, race, ethnicity, and class difference.

In a similar vein, Barry's work participates in a rich autobiographical tradition and especially a 1980s–1990s mode of writing the personal, destabilizing the personal through the twenty-first-century graphic novel. In *Reinventing Comics*, McCloud points out how Barry and other women cartoonists of the "underground" period created works that were "rare, emotionally honest, politically charged and sexually frank" (102). Barry's comics qualify as "emotionally honest," but Barry complicates other forms of honesty in feminist or wimmin's comics. In a 2002 radio interview, she admits that *Demons* is the first book in which "I've actually used myself named Lynda as a main character, but it's myself trying to make myself look as cool as possible" (Interview). In an article on teaching future teachers to write their "educational autobiographies" and reflect on the circumstances that brought them to teaching, Kate Rousmaniere proactively relates Barry's work (though not the *Demons* strips specifically) to Carolyn Steedman's experimental memoir *Landscape for a Good Woman*. Both Steedman and Barry, she suggests, call for a critical investigation of memory. She adds:

For teachers, the retrieval and reflection of memories about our own schooling can help us make sense out of what it is that we do today as educators . . . and how our own professional practices and beliefs have been shaped. (89–90)

While I resist granting *Demons* any guaranteed therapeutic value, while Rousmaniere's essay does not explore the possibility of outright fabrication in the earnest educational autobiography, Barry's hands-on activities do have multiple applications for instructors. Her creative writing and illustration exercises, developed in her workshop and in her scrapbook-style how-to book *What It Is* (2008), begin with free association and can generate active critical thinking. For instance, while composing *Demons*, she jotted nouns on index cards, pulled a card at random, and created a story from whatever word came up. As she explains:

[T]he idea is that if you start to write about that [random word—*car*, for instance, *car*, and family cars spring to mind], there will be a lot of stories that will come automatically. And also there's gonna be trouble in those stories, because that's why I think stories stay in our heads. (Interview).

Although Barry theorizes memory, *Demons* disdains elitist literary criticism. In the strip "Lost and Found," whose title refers to classic ads and artists' imaginations, a "super dramatically educated" woman talks about canonical books to the present-day Lynda, whose image is labeled "jive-ass faker who can't spell and has no idea what 'story structure' even means" (212). Barry's protagonist defensively recalls a stifled college writing career:

[O]nly certain people were "advanced" enough for writing and literature. . . . My trouble ended when I started making comic strips. It's not something a person has to be very "advanced" to do. At least not in the minds of literary types. (215)

She justifies her choice of graphic art as an antiliterary move: "Nobody feels the need to provide deep critical insight to something written by hand. Mostly they want it as short as a want ad. . . . I can live with that." Yet she concludes with a want-ad appeal that resonates with proponents of composition studies and critical literacy: "Lost. Somewhere around puberty. Ability to make up stories. Happiness depends on it. Please write." (216). For all its artistry and depth, *Demons* eschews pretension and affirms thoughtful self-expression.

Lynda Barry sheds productive light on authorial accuracy and critiques graphic storytelling itself, insistently raising questions and challenging easy acceptance of the autobiographical narrator. *One Hundred Demons* poses as a multimedia album of recollections, as a therapeutic

exercise, and as a commentary on narrative truth telling. This graphic novel relies on self-conscious observations and critical inquiry, especially related to adolescence, social class, gender, race, and ethnicity. She invites readers to assume that the title's metaphoric monsters are her own inner demons and makes sly affective appeals through scrapbook-style collage and shifting modes of address, then exploits the confusion that arises from trust in her autobiographical narrator. *One Hundred Demons* lends itself to productive discussions of graphic narrative and provides fresh ways to exercise (and exorcise) memory and imagination.

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