

The Power of Graphic Narrative for Dementia Stories: Trauma, Aesthetics and Resilience in Sarah Leavitt's *Tangles* (2012) and Dana Walrath's *Aliceheimer's* (2013)

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Abstract: This article has three aims: it first argues that the aesthetics of graphic novels, rarely considered in Humanities dementia research, are especially suited to narratives about traumatic dementia. Second, it argues that, within the graphic narrative genre, both indirection and realism can facilitate dementia representations. Third, it argues that the realism each author uses 'corrects' well-meaning, idealising, dementia images aimed at challenging negative stereotypes. In this study of Sarah Leavitt's *Tangles* and Dana Walrath's *Aliceheimer's*, I show that each benefits from a particular style of realism that I call, for *Tangles*, 'abstract realism', and for *Aliceheimer's* 'adapted' or 'fantastic' realism. Each graphic realism style opens up for viewers the trauma of dementia for both the dementia subject herself and for those caring for her. Images move beyond stereotypes (while not idealising), furthering, via compassion, empathy and resilience, our understanding of this challenging condition so much a part of life today.

Keywords: dementia; trauma; trauma theory; graphic narrative; aesthetics; realism; resilience

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Dementia, Trauma and Graphic Narrative Aesthetics

Stories about dementia now constitute a sizeable part of Age Studies research. Such stories have increased since the condition (often called Alzheimer's/AD) grew into a perceived 'social challenge' as the twenty-first century got underway.¹ In the early years of public awareness of the condition, largely negative images predominated in popular discourse and even in academic research, often bolstered by pervasive neuroscience studies in medical journals.² Diverse art forms were used to tell often traumatic dementia stories, and these included film, fiction, drama and painting, with film being the most common artistic mode from 2006 on. Much of this humanities research presented an alternative, more positive, view of AD and has arguably mitigated some negativity.³ In any case, fewer negative images now dominate in the media.⁴

However, as Annette Leibing points out, ironically well-meaning, sometimes idealising, images aimed at challenging stereotypes may require a 'correction' because tending to leave out real bodily and psychological challenges of especially late-stage Alzheimer's.⁵ In other words, the trauma that dementia may cause both for the one living with it, and those caring for her, needs to be addressed: scholars still should recognise that dementia does not necessarily involve dreadful suffering.⁶ Telling the story from the position of the AD subject may help in this regard.⁷

One way that a correction may take place is by turning to a genre little studied in dementia research, namely graphic narrative. In general, because of the association with popular comic book fictions, graphic non-fiction was not taken seriously as an object worthy of academic study until artists, like [Art Spiegelman \(1996\)](#) and [Marianne Satrapi \(2004\)](#), together with critics, such as [Scott McCloud \(1994\)](#) and

¹ Dementia actually has many different causes, and takes varied forms. Alzheimer's is the term most often used, but I will use 'AD' (Alzheimer's Disease) so as to cover more conditions. For an overview of global increase of AD, perspective on the future and studies of the difficulty of diagnosis, see [Koehn et al. \(2012\)](#).

² See [Kaplan and Chivers \(2018\)](#) for citations and more on how neuroscience research unintentionally adds to negativity as regards AD.

³ [Kaplan and Chivers \(2018\)](#).

⁴ Films and plays about dementia continue to be made. These arguably respond to critiques regarding gender (too many works featuring white women with AD) while trying new storytelling techniques, as in the drama *The Father*, later made into a film starring Anthony Hopkins in 2020. This film attempted, with some success, to present the mind of the protagonist living with AD. Sally Potter's *Roads Not Taken* (2020), starred Javier Bardem as living with AD, while his daughter tries to help him. Another film, *Dick Johnson Is Dead* (2020), offers an engaging humorous perspective for a change. These new works show how dementia storytelling is evolving.

⁵ [Leibing \(2017\)](#).

⁶ [De Boer et al. \(2007\)](#).

⁷ See [Leibing \(2017\)](#).

Hillary Chute (2014), each in their own way defended the genre and demonstrated its artistic possibilities. As Chute notes in an interview with Elizabeth Station, ‘Comics shape stories into a series of framed moments’,⁸ which at the same time have aesthetic intimacy via a text that is entirely handwritten and drawn, what Satrapi calls ‘narrative drawing’. In related research, I’ve argued that graphic narrative may be especially fitting for representing trauma because it is a form that permits diverse aesthetic strategies from indirection to realism.⁹ This current study of the trauma of dementia adds to that project: I will look at how diverse kinds of realist techniques make vivid traumatic processes evolving as the narrative proceeds. Briefly, I contrast what I call an ‘abstract’ realism in Sarah Leavitt’s *Tangles* to an ‘adapted’ or ‘fantastic’ realism in Dana Walrath’s *Aliceheimer’s*. By ‘abstract realism’ I mean that while the figures resemble real people, they are presented via spare lines, their shape and colour indicating feeling or mood. By ‘adapted’ or ‘fantastic’ realism I mean the figure is, for example, indisputably a warm-hearted female, and yet she looks like nothing we have seen before. Drawing enables a light touch, as it were, avoiding the ‘heaviness’ of the photograph, and thus ironically enabling darker stories to be told without morbidity. Mental confusions may be imaged without the negativity of photorealism. Figures may even be drawn in a semi-comic fashion to forestall possible disgust which a photographic aesthetic may be unable to avoid. Each of the authors I study uses the form in her unique way. A comment Walrath made in an interview on the graphic narrative genre indicates one of her aims in using graphics: ‘Comics’, she says, ‘lead us to light because, subconsciously, we associate comics with laughter, and we need permission to laugh at sickness and not just describe it in medical terms’.¹⁰ I will show that a former belief that trauma could only be represented through indirect or experimental aesthetics is belied by how well the diverse ‘realisms’ of graphic narrative are able to communicate the trauma of dementia.

It is partly graphic narrative’s ability to combine usually distinct literary and visual strategies that makes possible representing at least two aspects of traumatic dementia. One has to do with the psyche, the other with the body. As regards the psyche, due to changes in the brain, time and space become fluid entities. AD subjects thus have a unique way of relating to time/space co-ordinates. She may have difficulty moving between past, present and future as distinct time zones. Sometimes the past seems to be what she is living through now. Her mind relives, and enacts, a particular past while her body is firmly in the here and now. On the simplest level in graphic fiction a drawn figure may be in a frame in the ‘objective’ present of the narrative while bubbles reveal

⁸ Chute, quoted in Station (2010).

⁹ Kaplan (2022). Trauma scholars have long argued over which aesthetic devices best communicate the unique experience of trauma. Bond and Craps (2019) summarise these debates efficiently.

¹⁰ Walrath, quoted in Stearns Bercaw (2016).

the subject's thoughts or mental images showing she's situated in another time dimension altogether. Past, present and future tend to merge into one another depending on triggers in the present. The graphic form with its ability to layer images is able to communicate this well.

On another level, that of the body, AD subjects suffer in a different way. They may lose control over bowel movements, have difficulty eating, may no longer recognise their environment or the placement of familiar objects or even know which room in a house is theirs. In general, the genre enables a candid look at the specific but diverse ways an AD subject may react to challenges without a 'state of dreadful suffering',¹¹ while also not covering over inevitable psychic losses and bodily changes. I will argue that, via its aesthetics, graphic fiction can avoid both the painful photorealist images of decline, and those tending to idealise AD subjects. The unique ability to render time and space as the AD subject experiences them is joined by the genre's equal ability to show multiple perspectives simultaneously across a page of panels: it is able to flatten relationships, as it were, into a kind of levelling – the antithesis of normal hierarchical and linear organisation of material. Viewers may experience (without depressing images) compassion and empathy for both the one living with AD and the carer watching her change.

Scholars who have understood comics as a serious art form include Karin Kukkonen, who, in her 2013 *Contemporary Comics Storytelling*, was one of the first to situate comics (or at least those she reads closely) in the context of postmodernism, a humanities philosophy claiming we live in a contemporary culture of relativity along with an abandonment of a secure moral ground from which to work. But she ultimately is not so much interested in linking graphic narrative to humanities critical theory as using a cognitive approach to the genre – that is attending to how the mind reads comics. Meanwhile, close to my scholarly concerns, both Andrés Romero-Jodár in *The Trauma Graphic Novel* (2017) and Harriet E. H. Earle in *Comics, Trauma, and the New Art of War* (2017) applied humanities trauma theory to comics. Earle's study, like mine, shows that the graphic form is especially productive for representing trauma and conflict, while Romero-Jodár argues that the dissociative narrative techniques he considers natural to the graphic form emphasise 'the structural fragmentation, indirection and simultaneity that are proper to trauma narratives', as several of us had earlier argued in relation to film.¹²

But this still leaves an unproductive binary as regards the 'proper' aesthetic form for trauma narratives – one that has long troubled the field.¹³ Romero-Jodár did not

¹¹ De Boer *et al.* (2007: 1021).

¹² Romero-Jodár (2017: 172); Kaplan (2005); Schwab (2010).

¹³ Kaplan (2005); Kaplan and Wang (2004); Bond and Craps (2019).

realise that in applying trauma theory debates to comics he was making an intervention (as had [Kukkonen \[2013\]](#) and [Earle \[2017\]](#)) in introducing postmodernism to comics. If Spiegelman and others saw the potential for comics to take on serious socio-political concerns, so recent scholars saw the potential for comics to foster and further select critical theory, such as affect theory and psychoanalysis, so beautifully integrated in Alison Bechdel's haunting graphic memoir.¹⁴

However, the important issue in at least the dementia narratives I study, is not indirection or fragmentation versus photographic realism (the original binary trauma theorists debated) but rather developing a unique realist aesthetics appropriate for AD trauma. In analysing the two graphic texts below, namely *Tangles* and *Aliceheimer's*, I argue that graphic techniques – such as the intimacy of hand drawing, the chosen colour palette, organisation of panels on the page and the combination of words and images – offer new possibilities for presenting AD. Drawing can be expressive in ways other than photography. While every reader has her own response, the graphic process may evoke empathic emotions in viewers while at the same time avoiding turning them away, as may some of the photorealist films about dementia (e.g. *Iris* [2001], *Still Alice* [2014] or *Amour* [2012] especially).¹⁵ It also allows artists to stay with the tragic aspects of AD, even to the moment of death, instead of an AD narrative seeming to need ending with the protagonist living relatively well, or having some sort of breakthrough.¹⁶

Trauma, Healing and Resilience in Sarah Leavitt's *Tangles* (2012)

Sarah Leavitt's *Tangles* (2012) follows a young daughter, very close to her mother since early childhood, suddenly having her busy life dramatically changed by her mother's slowly developing AD. Leavitt as author (I will use Leavitt/narrator to refer to Leavitt's fictionalised self within the memoir) keeps mainly to the daughter's perspective, but, indirectly, through the power of graphic techniques, the viewer can appreciate her mother, Midge's, challenging experiences.

Leavitt divides her detailed memoir into three parts. While the parts are not strictly chronological (Leavitt allows memories to emerge as they are triggered by what is going on in the present), broadly the parts trace Midge's worsening condition, with Part 3 being the most heart-breaking section, if also a deeply humane text, in which

¹⁴ [Kaplan \(2022\)](#).

¹⁵ *Amour* offers a case where dementia symptoms emerge from a stroke, so not a specific case of AD.

¹⁶ New kinds of treatments and artistic practices are detailed in much of the humanities AD research including [Basting \(2009\)](#); [Swinnen \(2013\)](#); [Goldman \(2017\)](#); [Chivers \(2013\)](#); [Kaplan \(2013\)](#); [Zimmerman \(2017, 2020\)](#).

Midge dies of AD. The fragility and also pleasures of life, especially once AD is in the picture, are evident on every page as emotions shift, from frustration and trauma to lighter enjoyable family events with relatives recalling happy memories from the past. We are shown Midge and her sisters singing, Midge playing with her daughters or an exhausted but devoted husband finally understanding his wife's needs. The text as a whole offers an inspiring picture of a complex, multigenerational, middle-class, Jewish-Canadian family – the parents, teachers with liberal values. Leavitt's graphic techniques enable her not only to reveal the embarrassing and discomfiting bodily aspects of late-stage AD, but also the family's (and her mother's) resilience in the face of trauma.

Leavitt uses a large page, so that many diverse images are presented over its stretch. Unlike other graphic artists, Leavitt does not have gutters between panels; instead, there is just a thin line between them. An emotion in one panel, then, is either continued or quickly replaced by an emotion in the next image, creating a different effect than the gutter offers. Gutters leave gaps for the individual reader to fill in, but, eschewing gutters, Leavitt often includes a short text explaining what is going on. This engages the viewer's cognition, stabilising feelings for a moment. Leavitt's method as regards organisation on the page varies from page to page, but frequently there is a sort of shot-counter-shot sequence, especially during frequent phone calls Leavitt/narrator has with her parents, and significantly with her mother. Here, what McCloud calls 'sequential visual art' takes place. At other times, images are far from sequential, being distributed across the large page. In this case, one's eyes can travel where they please, which is especially useful in terms of linking past, present, and future into one intense whole.

Leavitt's black and white palette effectively sets the tone of loss, absence, and grief much harder to achieve via the realism of colour. We see the world in colour, of course, so using black and white immediately moves us away from a realism I will argue does not serve dementia stories well. Leavitt's process is to draw dense, precise, but basically single line drawings, without any bright colour but, by contrast, partly filled in with dense black.¹⁷ Images often focus on simple facial expressions (a single line face with downturned lips or with a smile); on body language (a body bending over, or shrugging shoulders); or alternatively, on hair, clothes, shawls or bed covers.¹⁸

Everything, then is in black and white, the black mainly (but not always) indicating trauma, fear, death, but also family tensions and crises, loss and grief. The pieces of black dispersed against the white background of most boxes adds texture and depth to the work. Notable is that Leavitt never shows anything in the white background,

¹⁷ Leavitt (2012: 19).

¹⁸ Leavitt (2012: 14–15).

except, from time to time, some words. It is usually white, empty space. This highlights the family figures that are her priority and concern, but also emphasises loss, absence, grief, trauma.¹⁹

There is a wonderfully evocative image on the cover of *Tangles* which indicates neatly how bonded Leavitt/narrator was with her mother as a child, the intimacy continuing as she grew up. Mother and daughter are shown side by side with their arms blending one into the other – a visual rendering of how Leavitt/narrator experiences their relationship. Another image on the book's title page (the title itself says much on its own) is similarly evocative of a symbiosis between mother and daughter not easy to convey in any media. Situated in a small black square, we find one composite white figure drawn with thin lines: Leavitt/narrator's head rests on her mother's shoulder and their arms are entwined without any border so that the figures seem to merge into one.

These images prepare us for Leavitt/narrator's nightmares as a young child, with which the book opens, and which uncannily anticipate her mother slipping away from her daughter as her AD progresses.²⁰ The dreams continue when Leavitt/narrator is a teenager and also a young adult. In the past, her mother always came to comfort her. Years later, when she is far away from home, she dreams of her mother 'floating away' from her, wearing a long nightgown.²¹ Leavitt draws Midge bent over, a shawl over her shoulders, body leaning forward, clearly rushing to her daughter in the night. The panel reaches across the page, but Midge's figure is to the far left of the panel, with the word 'COMING', in black capital letters. But there's a broad space of white to the right, with just a few words about the nightmares; tension and anxiety fill that space. The panel below is even more evocative of fear and loss. It shows a line drawing of just Leavitt/narrator's head at left of the panel, with a sad expression, showing her tears; and then a series of skeleton figures (representing her mother) floating away. Some explanatory words at the right end of the panel ground the image and bring closure.

It is images such as these that I call 'abstract realism' and that show indirection and avant-garde aesthetics are not necessary for representing trauma. The delicate icons are not weighed down in thick, heavy photo-style pictures: instead, icons provide a sense of lightness and sometimes black humour that counters stereotypes so difficult to avoid in the photographic realism of film, in the presence of real bodies watching a drama, or depicting dementia in painting or photography. Leavitt usually offers just one emotion per panel, but she shows the expression on someone's face changing panel by panel as the sequence moves forward. One might think this process is not

¹⁹ Leavitt (2012: 55).

²⁰ Leavitt (2012: 10).

²¹ Leavitt (2012: 11).

complex, but in fact, as the sequence continues, it adds complexity through repetition with a difference. Many expressions and emotions share the same page.

Difficult bodily changes and incapacities are rarely dealt with in any graphic detail in cinematic dementia stories because in their realism they might be upsetting or embarrassing for viewers. But the abstract realism of Leavitt's graphic techniques enables her to include unpleasant bodily processes as her mother's dementia gets worse. The abstract realism means that Midge's bodily changes can be shown directly without becoming embarrassing or morbid, albeit they severely challenge her daughter. For example, in a two-page section 'Taste and Smell', Leavitt's images express first Midge's losing her sense of taste and smell (an early sign of AD), then her confusion about appropriate clothing, her inability to brush her teeth properly and finally her being unable to get to the bathroom on time. The first page of 'Taste and Smell' shows Midge in white, a stick-person on a black background; the figures are in boxes within the panel, looking almost like postage stamps. There's an image of Midge waist up, again white against black, with a caption noting that losing taste and smell frightened Midge. Her losing touch with herself is shown in a frightening couple of squares within the panel showing Midge's head in the first square and her body in the next one (white against black again). The trauma for the AD subject could not be more clearly expressed.²²

This does not quite prepare us for what is to follow, however.²³ Leavitt/narrator tells readers that she smelled her mother, and was covered in shame. She suggests a bath, and then Leavitt draws Midge going upstairs and making a bowel movement in her pants. Leavitt inserts a panel with her own sad face in white against the black background. Leavitt/narrator's words 'Oh, God' along with the drawn expression of despair say so much about the tragic situation she and her mother are living through. There follows a series of panels about what Leavitt/narrator finds when she goes into the bathroom. Excrement is everywhere. The panels detail how Leavitt/narrator has to clean it all up, bit by bit, and get her mother clean as well. After Leavitt/narrator puts her mother in a clean nightgown and tucks her into a warm bed, there's a panel with her in the doorway. Words to the side say: 'Feel a new loneliness. And a new strength'. This is one of the first signs of the resilience that will carry Leavitt/narrator through the continuing trauma of her mother's AD.

The technique of blacking out some bodies at certain times, and leaving white space at others, offers viewers the diverse emotional registers characters are experiencing as events devolve. Scanning the page, a viewer can hold the different registers at the same time – both diverse emotions and individual reactions. Graphic techniques

²² Leavitt (2012: 59).

²³ Leavitt (2012: 39–40).

seem especially well adapted to representing the specific bodily and psychological aspects of dementia.

Part 3 of *Tangles* is at once the saddest part of the narrative and the one showing resilience in the face of trauma. Each page of this section contains many strong emotions across the range of feelings, from utter despair and sadness, loss and grief, to humour, and even fun. As Midge's moods continue to be unstable and unpredictable, the family rallies. Leavitt/narrator continues her somewhat guilty role of documenting changes in her mother: the guilt is evident in Leavitt/narrator drawing herself blotted in black and curled up writing down what she observes, trying to hide herself from view. Perhaps through so doing, Leavitt/narrator can gain control of her own feelings. She is able to settle in to being with Midge in the place where Midge is emotionally on any one day – at least until Leavitt/narrator's repressed emotions break through.

There is a somewhat humorous couple of pages called 'Popping Up', detailing Midge's difficulty sleeping. To give her Dad a break, Leavitt/narrator agrees to sleep with her mother, but instead of staying asleep, Midge keeps 'popping up' shortly after seeming to sleep.²⁴ Her mother sits up and starts singing pop songs, and talking to herself, while Leavitt/narrator tries to get her to go back to sleep. The black and white is especially effective here: the black suggests the night, and Midge's white pencil-thin body drumming away to herself, with Leavitt small beside her trying to 'model deep breathing', is at once amusing and tender.

The last few sections – 'New', 'Decision', 'Subsiding' and 'The End' – offer an array of emotions. There is the excitement about Leavitt/narrator's sister's baby, as new life emerges while Midge's life nears its end; the painful decision to move Midge to a nursing home; and the very sad decline that continues once she is there. Leavitt/narrator's mixed emotions through all this are vividly drawn and communicated, but it's significant that the trauma of seeing her mother suffering can no longer be controlled. To select just a few powerful images: there is the image of her father, unable to carry Midge any more, collapsing with her on the floor. Leavitt conveys this disaster – one of the things that made clear Midge could no longer be cared for at home – by drawing heavy black stick people, all entangled.²⁵ Leavitt/narrator details her mixed emotions from despair and feeling empty and dead inside (like other traumatised subjects, she wants to drive her car into a wall or cut herself), to bringing her partner, Domino, to her home. She finds some solace with Domino, especially as regards Domino seeing ways to celebrate Midge (Domino describes Midge's mind as like a tangled garden with spots of brightness).²⁶ Significantly, Leavitt/narrator's nightmares about her

²⁴ Leavitt (2012: 105).

²⁵ Leavitt (2012: 116).

²⁶ Leavitt (2012: 114).

mother now turn even more frightening, traumatic even. One dream includes her cat hanging from a tree turning into her mother when the cat is cut down.²⁷

The last sections deserve an article on their own, so evocative and powerfully emotional are the drawings. As Midge nears death, so the family gathers to say goodbye to her in the nursing home. One image expresses the family's grief remarkably: Leavitt shows the family finally having to leave the nursing home after an extended visit by drawing figures, small, bent over, black, moving out in a single line.²⁸ In the section 'After', Leavitt/narrator details her commitment to reading the Kaddish (the Jewish prayer for the dead) for the required 11 months. It gives her some comfort. Jogging amongst the trees also helps. Midge has been linked to nature and especially trees throughout the narrative, and now Leavitt/narrator senses her in the forest.

The last two powerful images I will mention are first, Leavitt's image accompanying the words 'Many times a day I was knocked off my feet by the absolute absence of my mother'.²⁹ The image is of a black tree, broken in half, with twigs scattered around. The very last image in the book returns to Leavitt/narrator's dreams about her mother. It is the only one offering a peaceful idea of Midge and her connection to her daughter. Leavitt/narrator dreams that her mother had planted seeds on her daughter's shoulders that were now growing into paper flowers.³⁰ It's as if Leavitt/narrator finally realises how much love her mother (often tough and demanding) has given her, how the 'seeds' of that giving can now bear fruit; paradoxically, however, this can only happen after her mother is no longer alive. What is remarkable about Leavitt's graphic memoir is not only how powerfully it is able to communicate the trauma of dementia for both the AD subject herself and the one caring for her, but also reveal compassion, the complexity of emotional life and death and the healing that shared grief can ensure.

Dana Walrath's *Aliceheimer's* (2013) and 'Adapted' or 'Fantastic' Realism

Aliceheimer's, in contrast to *Tangles*, begins with an adult daughter, somewhat estranged from her mother, deciding to bring her mother to live with her once AD has set in. To Walrath, this comes as partial compensation for their being distant most of her adult life. It is Walrath's attempt to get to know her mother, to bond deeply with her, before it is too late. Different also is that Walrath is a Professor of Anthropology

²⁷ Leavitt (2012: 115).

²⁸ Leavitt (2012: 120).

²⁹ Leavitt (2012: 125).

³⁰ Leavitt (2012: 127).

and Medicine, and a blogger, novelist and performer as well. This puts her in a position to comment on AD from a medical perspective and even introduce theoretical commentary on practices and theories of AD. But Walrath follows Leavitt in her intense reaction to her mother's condition and her strong interest in what the graphic form is able to achieve in fictionalising her experiences. Bringing humour to bear on her mother's ever-changing ways of being in the world is one self-conscious aim of Walrath's work.

As an already accomplished theorist and writer, then, Walrath, as author (again, the narrator within the text needs to be distinguished from the 'character' Dana within the story) takes the opportunity in an extended Introduction to *Aliceheimer's* to make the humanities case against over-medicalising AD subjects or insisting on narratives of decline and victimhood. From comments in this Introduction, the reader gathers Walrath's graphic narrative is aimed at both carers and AD subjects: 'The medium itself grants permission to laugh at the experience ... Besides needing a laugh, carers are a tired group with limited free time. Graphic narrative has the advantage of speed. Pictures compress narrative. They establish setting and tone immediately.'³¹ While Walrath's position may have some of the utopian aspects Leibling worries about, ultimately she avoids idealising AD. I see her humorous approach, made possible by the graphic form, as taking viewers more deeply into the AD subject's consciousness. We find ourselves understanding more about AD through what laughter enables.

Walrath's comic form is original. Usually, as we saw in looking at *Tangles*, comics consist of a page of discrete panels or 'boxes', separated by the so-called 'gutters' which slow down the narrative and give readers a sense of control, deciding what to look at when. The reader is not enmeshed in time, as with film.³² In a variation from the norm, however, Walrath provides very large page-length panels, usually just one per page. Her complex drawings take up the left-hand page, and extended commentary takes up the right-hand page. The drawings vary from page to page depending on the theme Walrath poses. Sometimes there is only one image of Alice on the page; other times, there are several images with diverse meanings in barely recognisable panels. None are in the usual boxes with lines or gutters in between.

This means that the reader has to stay on the page for a while, gathering the import of what she sees. Then we can turn to the extended text on the opposite page for commentary and explanation. Originally (we learn in the Introduction) Walrath allowed the images to tell their own story, but she later decided to add the commentary. This opens up the comic to Walrath's own story, alongside her mother's: she brings us into her ongoing process vis-à-vis her mother, learning to listen carefully to Alice so as

³¹ Walrath (2013: 5).

³² For further discussion see DeKoven (2006).

to interpret for viewers observations her mother makes that otherwise seem totally random. Walrath is able to do this because she first managed to participate in the ‘wonderland’ her mother is creating through AD.

The first page, with the caption ‘Flying Sun’, is startling: we see two drawings in the two large panels; the first is a view of a woman’s face squeezed between rocks with incomprehensible words coming out of her mouth. The second is a close-up of the same face with the unreadable words. There is no commentary, so we are left to make of this what we can.³³ But the next page is filled with a full-page frontal drawing of a strange but friendly figure who is introduced (on the commentary page) as ‘Alice’. The face is quite clear, with neat hair surrounding it, while the body (not in proportion), is made up of a photographic collage of pieces with words we later learn are taken from Lewis Carroll’s *Alice in Wonderland*. Even stranger is the shadow of the body, looking like spikes or flowing hair. Two little hands and feet peep out from the figure.³⁴ The overall effect is of an alert, kindly woman, in a sense larger than life, looking out at the viewer, although not meeting our gaze. This is the effect Walrath is looking for, namely to communicate the strangeness of AD while also showing it as benign, its own thing, not comparable to any other experience we know about. We do not have to be afraid of the AD subject, although Walrath herself has been slow to realise that.

Walrath, then, starts the book with the theme of strangeness, absence and loss. In accordance with this, the next page shocks the viewer: again, we find just one Alice-figure drawn up close, very similar to the previous one except that now there is the shocking absence of a face and head. Where there would have been a head, we have the words: ‘Alice is Disappearing: Soon There Will Be None’.³⁵ It is a traumatic image for the viewer as well as showing Walrath’s traumatic response to her mother’s changed ways of being. Instead of the spiky lines surrounding the body (made up as before with pieces of cut-up pages from *Alice in Wonderland*) we have dense tangled circles to indicate that Alice’s mind is changing. Walrath proceeds to track how Alice is changing in what follows, always with the aim of understanding rather than just describing. It is a fitting approach for a daughter trained in medicine and anthropology who has discovered graphic techniques appropriate to her task.

Walrath’s statement on the next page that ‘None Is Hard to Draw’ implicitly takes up the aesthetic problem posed by any kind of realism, namely how to represent absence? Her solution on this page is to draw an elaborate sort of ‘sampler’ of diverse pencil marks, each indicating a day in Alice’s life of 77 years.³⁶ Many of these days were shared with her daughter. Within the page-sized panel, to the right of the marks,

³³ Walrath (2013: 7).

³⁴ Walrath (2013: 9).

³⁵ Walrath (2013: 11).

³⁶ Walrath (2013: 13).

we can see a very dim ghostly figure that is just recognisable as Alice. The words 'Days W/O Alice' appear at the top of that panel. The barely visible Alice conveys her absence in the present and presumably time to come. To emphasise the point, on the next two pages Walrath puts the two panels side by side, with the words repeated, 'disappearing Alice ...' and on the linked page, '... none is hard to draw'.³⁷ It is a remarkable aesthetic feat – haunting in what it expresses about someone 'disappearing'. Walrath, through her fantastic realism, has found a way to draw 'none', even as soon she will be able to draw the 'new' Alice as she begins to understand how her mother's mind works, and to be less afraid.

Effectively continuing her theme of absence, loss and change, Walrath draws a page of panels, one row of which has a close-up of Alice's face, while the lower row has small versions of the large earlier figures. The point here is that in most of the images (as per the title 'Missing Pieces' on the commentary page) something is missing from what would be a more realistic image. In one panel showing Alice's face an eye is missing; in another, the hair-curls near her face have gone; some of the body images have hands missing and in a frightening one, the entire face is wiped out. Words (scarcely visible, so as to bolster the idea of absence) can be found saying, 'She isn't losing tangible parts, though she is disappearing', as if explaining what's meant metaphorically by an eye missing.³⁸ Change is taking place, but Alice is still very much herself.

From this moment on, Walrath develops a new concept for her mother's situation. Alice is constructing a unique world through what is happening in her brain, and Walrath aims to join her in this world, and to 'translate' it so that it makes a certain amount of sense. But Alice's AD world is fantastical. For example, the section 'Flight' has two page-sized panels: in the first, we see Alice with all the 'pieces' (hair, hands, feet, face) in place, trying to fly towards the sun; in the second panel, we see Alice's hands close to the sun. Walrath writes in the first panel: 'she didn't take off ...' and in the second, 'Though she has special powers'.³⁹ The idea of Alice having 'special powers' is a wonderful and reassuring concept that carries Walrath through what could have been a devastating journey with her mother living with AD. Similarly, the idea of Alice being 'ungrounded' because losing the memory that kept her grounded is comforting because freeing her mother of painful memories. Walrath draws her mother seemingly far off the ground, just her feet showing beneath the same cut-up collaged gown shown from the waist down.⁴⁰

The section 'Alzheimer's' about halfway through the graphic narrative seems to stabilise the story. Walrath draws a panel bringing together several of the strange

³⁷ Walrath (2013: 15).

³⁸ Walrath (2013: 17).

³⁹ Walrath (2013: 19).

⁴⁰ Walrath (2013: 13).

Alice-bodies from the text so far: the images form a kind of circle, suggesting there is no way out of her condition, and yet the faces look happy.⁴¹ As in all the sections, the accompanying text details ways Walrath and her family re-conceptualise Alice's hallucinations making meaning from them, given the material reality that triggers a hallucination.

In the following sections (which now include colour for the first time), Walrath provides images of some of Alice's hallucinations, such as broccoli growing out of her ears.⁴² Walrath's graphic techniques communicate brilliantly (via fantastical realism) what is going on in Alice's mind. There is certainly friendly humour in these images, but Walrath is not making light of the condition: she rather allows the family, and Alice too, to laugh at what she imagines. Especially moving are panels dealing with Alice missing her husband, Dave, who died a few years earlier. In one panel, Walrath is seen sharing her mother's hallucination of Dave (clad in a bright red top) leaping about in a tree they are standing by.⁴³ Walrath and her husband now understand that, after a tumultuous marriage, Alice is longing to make amends. Walrath is happy to participate in her mother's fantasies which make a certain sense when put in context.

There are still visual surprises as the text moves forward, such as in the section 'Umbilicus'.⁴⁴ Here Walrath addresses her past relationship with her mother from an original perspective, that of imagining the moment of her birth. One panel shows a male doctor (drawn in the most realistic way of any drawing so far) bringing Walrath out of her mother's womb. A sentence: 'I first met Alice in 1960. I don't remember the details...', sits at the top of the page.⁴⁵ The commentary opposite reveals some details about how Alice was living when Walrath was born (which was in a poor area of New York City with a nasty smell from a nearby slaughterhouse). But the point of this drawing is to emphasise Alice now unable to remember Walrath's birth, or who her father was. On the next page, when Walrath expands the image of the birth now with a full-face image of Alice opposite, we find Alice saying the words 'I'm your mother. Who's your Daddy?'⁴⁶ This sequence ends with a page-length panel complementing the first sentence about remembering (i.e. Walrath noting that she does not recall her birth) with 'Neither does she.' Walrath's conclusion, 'Aliceheimer's', is a way to account for such confusions.⁴⁷

⁴¹ Walrath (2013: 21).

⁴² Walrath (2013: 17–21).

⁴³ Walrath (2013: 27).

⁴⁴ Walrath (2013: 39–43).

⁴⁵ Walrath (2013: 39).

⁴⁶ Walrath (2013: 47).

⁴⁷ Walrath (2013: 43).

The next series of pages follow up on Alice's 'Who's your Daddy?' question as Alice more frequently than before seeks to find her husband, Dave. Two striking panels consist of a full-face image of Alice in the left panel looking to the right where, in the next panel, we see a small image of Dave way up in a tree.⁴⁸ Over the page, we have an image of Dave apparently reaching down to grab Alice, whose large face is now shown on the right-hand panel, looking up left at Dave. Walrath expands these two images, inserting Dave alone on the right-hand page, and with a now extreme close-up of just the top of Alice's head, her brow and her eyes on the opposite page.⁴⁹ The following pages in the section 'Alice's Wonderland' show panels where Alice and Dave try to reach one another but cannot, and finally there is a wonderful image of the two embracing, Dave in his usual red shirt and blue pants, Alice in her Alice in Wonderland cut-out strips, their house, garden and children on the opposite panel.⁵⁰

The first sentence on the commentary page also picks up from the earlier 'Who's your Daddy?' section. It reads: 'My unclear provenance began long before Alzheimer's'.⁵¹ Walrath evidently looked different from her siblings, often causing her to be laughed at in school. Expanding on this, and shifting gears at the same time, Walrath turns to a regular school class photograph showing Walrath at a young age. Significantly, Walrath *draws* the class photo rather than reprinting the original, finding a form in between 'adapted-' and 'photo-'realism. However, she leaves her own image from the original photorealistic one, so that Walrath stands out as having much darker skin and hair than her class mates and teachers.

The drawing of the class photo makes the transition for Walrath to leave her mother's world which was drawn appropriately in what I have called 'adapted or fantastic realism'. She goes on to offer the photographic realism of family photos so as to situate herself and her mother's prior world in juxtaposition to that of Alice's Alzheimer's world. Walrath calls this section, 'Before Wonderland, NYC, circa 1944', and in effect it brings together the fantastic realism of Alice's Alzheimer's and the hard, Second World War realities of Alice's upbringing and culture.⁵² Included here are Walrath's own difficult experiences growing up given her mother's inability to talk about or recognise bodily matters (such as menstruation, urination, excretory functions) due to her (Alice's) own mother's training. Social forms pass from one generation to the next, invisibly, just like traumatic memories of disastrous events. Walrath evokes the irony of Alice's present: her mother thinks the nappy she has to wear because she has

⁴⁸ Walrath (2013: 45).

⁴⁹ Walrath (2013: 49).

⁵⁰ Walrath (2013: 53–5).

⁵¹ Walrath (2013: 55).

⁵² Walrath (2013: 57–60).

become incontinent is her menstruation pad. This in turn triggers Walrath's anger that her mother could not help her at important moments of her childhood.

After the interlude of photorealism, Walrath continues with panels drawn in fantastic realism both to comment on her Armenian roots, largely not referred to by Alice as Walrath grew up, and her wish to explore her Armenian background and search for relatives still living in Armenia. The trauma of the genocide haunted Alice without her fully having known it, and now triggers Walrath's interest. Alice meanwhile is, as Walrath puts it, with each day 'becoming developmentally younger'.⁵³ The panels now show Alice as an adolescent, complete with red velvet bow in her hair, and then as a toddler with short hair walking unsteadily.

The text ends with two beautiful panels across which Walrath has drawn her mother's body. Alice's words in the left-hand panel describe her sense of being many selves in one day. The right-hand panel shows her with her hair radiating out like sun beams, her face peaceful with eyes closed, and dim figures, differently aged, dancing around her shoulders. Alice, now agreeably situated in a care facility, regularly interacts with Walrath via Skype. They sing together, moving between English and Armenian; the last lines of the text are:

Alice typing: Heart. Heart.

Me typing (while singing): I like all these hearts.

Alice typing: Heart and Soul. (Then in Armenian, ed) Anoush es. Sir doo hokis yaro jan ... Anoush es---you are sweet. I keep these words in case I ever need help remembering.⁵⁴

Conclusion

Both of these texts, each in its own way, teaches us something profound about the trauma of AD through the unique aesthetic techniques of the graphic form. The visual styles each author selects could not be more different, and yet each makes an impact through developing a unique kind of realism, what I have called, respectively, 'abstract realism' and 'adapted' or 'fantastic' realism. These modalities differ from the binary common in humanities research regarding trauma, namely that of so-called indirection (or avant-garde techniques) versus a realistic/historical modality. In a sense, both abstract realism and fantastic realism manage, because of the graphic form, to combine elements of indirection with elements of realism, creating something new in the process.

⁵³ Walrath (2013: 54).

⁵⁴ Walrath (2013: 69).

The diverse positions the authors take up mean that very different views of AD emerge. Leavitt situates herself as observing and recording changes in her mother; viewers learn what it is like to watch a mother living and changing with AD. Meanwhile, we learn much too about Leavitt's own trauma, resilience and bravery as she confronts a very different mother over time. The drawings vividly communicate Midge's traumatic experiences as the condition worsens. Through Leavitt's empathy and concern, and how she draws her mother, we too empathise with Midge and the family. Black humour has its place at times, but on the whole the focus of this graphic text is on absence, loss and grief experienced by a young woman close to her mother. Midge's experiences are related via Leavitt rather than directly from Midge's stance.

By contrast, Walrath's position is more distanced, yet she is paradoxically closer to her mother's subjectivity than in Leavitt's case. Walrath's medical knowledge, her reading, and experience enable her to take a unique approach to the AD she finds her mother developing. Walrath manages to get inside her mother's changing views of the world, so as to participate in that world. But more significantly, this enables her mother, Alice, to convey her world to us. Walrath shows how AD can be seen to 'make sense', a position that delivers AD subjects from being pitied, rejected or neglected. Pervasive stereotypes disappear with this approach. Walrath's drawings use humour and fantasy to create something strange and beautiful, a wonderland world, indeed, that nevertheless communicates what her mother is going through. Walrath and her mother ironically get closer through her mother's experiences. That is, their lives intertwine productively as they together experience Alice's changing world. The two manage to repair a relationship that had not been close before through Walrath learning to enter into her mother's new world and forgive her. While this approach may not be appropriate in many instances, it offers a constructive model to aim for, always understanding that it may not be possible.

Graphic narrative has the power to communicate diverse experiences as regards mothers and daughters in the context of AD. Photographic realism can only go so far: the graphic form arguably takes us further into AD in constructive ways that perhaps deserve more acknowledgement than hitherto in the AD scholarly literature.

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To cite the article: Kaplan, E. A. (2023), 'The Power of Graphic Narrative for Dementia Stories: Trauma, Aesthetics, and Resilience in Sarah Leavitt's *Tangles* (2012) and Dana Walrath's *Aliceheimer's* (2013)', *Journal of the British Academy*, 11(s2): 147–166.

<https://doi.org/10.5871/jba/011s2.147>

Journal of the British Academy (ISSN 2052–7217) is published by
The British Academy, 10–11 Carlton House Terrace, London, SW1Y 5AH
www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk