

A potential development for cognitive poetics: text world theory and verbo-visual narratives

Multi-modal texts are increasingly prevalent in today's media-rich society and this in itself provides the justification for further research into how readers make sense of such texts. Kress and van Leeuwen (2001, 2006) explore the modality of images, and Peeters (1991) investigates the representation of emotions and thoughts, which can be depicted either iconically or linguistically, or through a combination of words and images. Analysts of verbo-visual narratives (comic books, graphic novels, etc.) such as Neil Cohn (2013), Scott McCloud (1993), Thierry Groensteen (2007, 2013), Benoît Peeters (1991), Mario Saraceni (2000, 2003) and others, have researched and constructed frameworks designed to facilitate discussion of texts composed of words and images. Teresa Bridgeman (2005) draws on the work of Catherine Emmott (1997) and Paul Werth (1999) in suggesting ways in which frame theory and text world theory can also inform the reading of such texts. What follows is an overview of Bridgeman's work with additional examples and ideas from my own reading.

I. The role of the reader of verbo-visual texts

Bridgeman opens her argument with a comment on the perceived inferior status of verbo-visual texts in comparison with texts composed entirely of words, because, like film, the verbo-visual text has an immediacy that limits the extent of interpretative work required by the reader. In some senses this is true, but it is not the case that the reader of graphic novels is merely a passive recipient. For example, the linearity of the reading process does not necessarily apply to verbo-visual texts. The reader can see much more of the story at a glance and the eye can be drawn to many points on the page before a conventional left-to-right and top-to-bottom reading is undertaken. (Cohn in particular has undertaken research using eye-tracking to investigate this aspect of verbo-visual texts more closely.) Bridgeman contends that the 'panoramic view' available to the reader means that textual elements can be processed 'first as potentially accessible details in a whole, and then as individual centres of experience'. Both readings are generated by the same 'word-image combination', and therefore 'the work of construction of meaningful relationships between world elements must be the reader's' (2005: 126).

There is other work for the reader to do besides. Bridgeman notes that there exists a relationship between 'fictional "fact" ' and 'modalised subjective experience'. The reader tracks which character is experiencing what and assigns epistemological and/or ontological status to textual elements, differentiating between what is known and what is understood or believed (2005: 115). In dealing with the numerous text worlds present in one verbo-visual text, the reader allocates textual elements and sequences to various worlds and constructs relationships between them.

In addition, the reader constructs an imagined world *outside* the frame. Scott McCloud's famous example of the interpretative activity which is undertaken by the reader in the space between two frames, or the 'gutter', is that of the reader who swings the axe (see Figure 1). Similarly, Kessler points out how the reader completes the stages of an action in *Astérix Légionnaire*, where Uderzo has drawn only the opening and closing stages of the action in question (see Figure 2). Obelix kicks the tree and the frame which follows shows the tree lying on the ground, but it is the reader who imagines the tree in the act of falling.

Bridgeman refers to Emmott's work on priming in her explanation of the need to take into account sequence and ongoing processing (Bridgeman, 2005: 120; Emmott, 1997). The notion of priming must be modified somewhat when discussing verbo-visual texts because much of the information required is visually available to the reader – the characters are visually present in the frame – but, as Bridgeman points out, the reader must be able to recognise that character as the *same* character. Figure 3 shows a scene from *Harrow County*, in which the Skinless Boy has penetrated the house where Emmy is being held captive. He is recognisable in this frame only by his yellow eyes, with which the reader is already familiar (see Figure 5). The Skinless Boy is also present in the frame following (see Figure 4), but only as a shadow above Emmy's head. Nevertheless, the reader will connect this shadow with the appearance of the Skinless Boy in the previous frame, and will know in advance that rescue is at hand for Emmy.

The discussion will now take a closer look at the different types of text worlds as described initially by Werth and adapted by Bridgeman (see Appendix A), how movement is effected between text worlds and how different text worlds can be processed simultaneously.

II. Different types of text world

Bridgeman notes that Werth uses a Chinese box model of worlds and Marie-Laure Ryan a model with a world and satellites 'with degrees of remoteness from the centre' (2005: 118-119). Both models can be represented in verbo-visual texts. In default mode, the dominant frame represents the textual-actual-world with embedded subworlds of the thought and speech of characters, following the Chinese box pattern (119). In other words, the different text worlds are physically represented on the page by means of the frames around each image and each speech and/or thought bubble. The two-page spread from *Fables* in Figure 6 has been discussed at some length by Karin Kukkonen in her exploration of comics and the discourse of postmodernism (2013: 48-50). The reader is given access to the fictional mind of the Frog Prince via an attitudinal subworld. In the third frame from the left, the focus closes in on the Frog Prince's eye as his thoughts are revealed. The subjective experience of the character creates a subworld within the larger textual-actual-world (see Appendix A). A change in colour scheme indicates that the events witnessed are taking place only in the Frog Prince's 'mind's eye' as he considers a possible and imagined future; the subworld is closed when the colour scheme returns to normal. As Bridgeman notes, 'the world continues to be that set up at the entry point, unless evidence to the contrary is provided' (2005: 122), in this case, the switch in colour scheme.

a) The Narrative World: *Spirits of the Dead*

Spirits of the Dead is a collection of Edgar Allan Poe's tales adapted and retold in verbo-visual form. The narrator figure seen in Figure 7 is present throughout the volume, but s/he occupies an unusual position which is sometimes internal and sometimes external to the narrative. In this particular adaptation of Poe's *The Masque of the Red Death*, the androgynous narrator – a type of Tiresias figure – is internal to the story. S/he is a storyteller seeking a story when s/he finds a hooded figure wandering through the misty ruins. This shadowy figure tells his story while the reader listens in. The reader is therefore twice displaced as narratee, listening to someone telling someone else a story. On the story's final page (Figure 8), the

man telling the story is revealed as King Prospero, meaning that he is a character in the story's text world.

Prospero does not step out of his textual-actual-world (see Appendix A). His telling of the story is part of his own world, as is his death at the end. For the Tiresias figure, his/her conversation with Prospero is the discourse world, and the story is the text world. For the reader, the discourse world is the book containing all the adaptations of Poe, and the text world includes the Tiresias figure's narrative world (which is collapsed into the story's text world because this traveller/listener is a character) and Prospero's textual-actual-world.

By way of contrast, in Figure 9, the Tiresias figure is *external* to the story. Although s/he is present in the frame and is apparently watching events happen, s/he does not communicate directly with any of the characters and comments only on the action of the story, winding up events for the reader. The paratextual addition of the words 'The End' in a demarcated box occur a level up from the narrative world to take place in the discourse world. The author(s) inform the reader that this particular tale has reached its end.

b) The Narrative World: *Lighter Than My Shadow*

Lighter Than My Shadow is an autobiographical memoir in which writer and artist Katie Green explores her battle with anorexia. At the opening of the narrative, the reader sees a present-day enactor of the author-figure sitting at her desk in the act of creating the book the reader is reading (Figure 10). The images of the naked figures in foetal position represent an earlier author-enactor figure, dating from the time when Katie Green was struggling with anorexia. Figure 11, the next page in the book, shows the black squiggle behind the naked figures being drawn down into the author-enactor's pen, and the final image in the sequence (Figure 12) shows the black squiggle, now an ink-substitute, emerging from the pen onto the paper. This black squiggle is a feature of the entire book: it grows over Katie's head and remains with her throughout until she learns how to defeat it. The sequence shown in figures 10 to 12 informs the reader that the author is writing about this period from her life in an effort to purge herself of the memories which haunt her, and that the experience of producing this book is, for Katie Green, one of catharsis.

The text world thereby incorporates aspects of the discourse world. The reader is reading an autobiographical memoir in which the author has demonstrated here in a sequence of images the very personal reasons behind the production of this book, and the reader sees on the page the author in the process of writing. The text world itself is Katie's story, beginning when she was a small girl and bringing her story up to the present day.

c) Narrative World: *Dotter of Her Father's Eyes*

The levels of narration in this text are rather complicated. The writer Mary Talbot is an academic married to Bryan Talbot, author and illustrator of many successful graphic novels. At the beginning of the story, the fictional counterpart of the real-life Mary is seen reading the biography of Lucia Joyce by Carol Loeb Shloss. These details are part of the text's discourse world: Mary and Bryan Talbot are real, Mary's father was real and the book by Shloss is real. The Talbots' book tells of two dysfunctional father-daughter relationships. The story of Mary and her 'cold mad feary father', an eminent Joycean scholar, is told alongside that of Lucia Joyce, daughter of the famous James, whose promising career as a dancer is cut tragically short with her parents being in no small way to blame. The reader must therefore follow three separate text worlds: the story of Lucia Joyce, the story of Mary's childhood, and the present-day world of Bryan and Mary. These three worlds are represented by three different colour schemes. Lucia Joyce's story is told in black and white (figure 13); Mary's childhood is rendered in sepia with occasional splashes of red (figure 14); and Bryan and Mary's present-day is in full colour (figure 15). Considered chronologically, the colour scheme moves through black and white into sepia and finally into full colour, as if the reader were looking at a century's worth of old photographs. Splashes of colour dribble into the sepia colour-scheme, and these splashes become increasingly dominant as Mary and Bryan's history begins to catch up with the present time.

III. Signalling a shift between worlds

Devices to signal a shift between worlds include the following: modification of the frame pattern, such as using a semi-permeable dotted line or wavy shapes to indicate that the character is dreaming; inclusion of place and date in the space demarcated for narratorial comment; use of different colour schemes as seen above in *Dotter of Her Father's Eyes* and

Lighter Than My Shadow; voice-over narration and contrasting contents as exemplified in the following sequence from *Harrow County*.

This sequence appears close to the end of the first volume, when protagonist Emmy has discovered her real identity as a second incarnation of the witch Hester Beck, who was murdered eighteen years ago in retribution for her activities by the inhabitants of Harrow County. Emmy has inherited Hester's healing powers and the couple shown (see Figure 16) have overcome their suspicion of Emmy and are seeking her help with a sick child. The couple follow Emmy into the house, but the main focus of this image is the calf which is captured in the action of running from right to left across the frame, counter to the left-right reading path. The calf's face points towards the blue box to the top left of the frame which contains Emmy's spoken words to the couple as they move towards the house at the back of the frame and away from the reader.

The reader assumes this calf to be the very same animal healed by Emmy at the story's opening, and its appearance in this section of the narrative serves as a reminder of Emmy's power to do good. Emmy's voice continues as they move inside the house and is 'heard' over this frame: 'She's gonna be just fine'. The dialogue has moved into the space usually reserved for the narratorial 'peripheral world' described by Bridgeman (2005: 119). Emmy's 'voice-over' continues into the next frame (see Figure 17) with the words 'There's nothing to worry about', and, as in the previous frame, this dialogue occupies the same peripheral space and is demarcated by a blue box. In addition, the quotation marks placed around both remarks help the reader to understand that the words represent Emmy's utterances to the worried parents. But there is a difference between the two remarks. The words 'She's gonna be just fine' are *supported* by the accompanying image: Emmy's remark refers to the sick child who at present is feverish, but also to the calf, who has recovered completely and is shown happily cantering across the foreground. The implication, of course, is that the child will make a full recovery just as the calf did. In Figure 17, however, Emmy's words are 'heard' over an image of a very different text world. Harrow County has been replaced with a city scene where it is pouring with rain and the street lights are illuminated to pierce the gloom. Emmy's claim that 'There's nothing to worry about' is true in relation to the child and her parents, but untrue in relation to the image it accompanies: in the second volume of *Harrow County*, Kammi, an inhabitant of

this city world, provides Emmy with plenty to worry about. Emmy's words in the latter frame are undermined by the image. She is talking about the child, of course, but the reader's attention is grabbed by the sudden intrusion of a visual image of a completely different text world, and it is natural for the reader to consider in what way Emmy's words might relate to this new world, and to draw the conclusion that this new world does indeed contain something to worry about.

The shift between text worlds itself is effected over the two frames, with Emmy's 'voiceover' linking the two. Emmy's voice works in tandem with the drawing-back of the 'camera' to pull the reader out of the text world of Harrow County, but the continuation of this voice in the new text world of the rainy city links the two worlds as the transition is made from one to the other. We cannot be said to be wholly in the rainy-city text world until the frame following the one shown, where Emmy's voice can no longer be heard.

IV. Simultaneous sequences in more than one world

Bridgeman notes that '[t]he graphic layout of BD not only allows more than one world to be present in a single frame, it also allows sequences in more than one world to be presented as simultaneous' (2005: 123). In the example explored below, this use of simultaneous sequences occurs at the climax of the narrative and reveals an important truth about the nature of some of the characters.

Livestock is Hannah Berry's third graphic novel, and it tracks the career of Clementine Darling, singer and political spokesperson. Berry's political dystopia explores how public opinion is both created and controlled by the media through adored celebrities such as Darling, who are used time and time again to distract public attention from the political issues of the day. Berry's celebrities are in fact directly affiliated with political parties and are manipulated into endorsing whatever policy is currently making the headlines. The policy which forms the subject of Berry's tale is that of cloning. Politicians and scientists have secretly endorsed the cloning of human beings, and, as a character who is an opponent of cloning points out, 'sentient clones created by these companies wouldn't be recognised as free citizens - technically these people would be classed as "livestock" '. Berry's tale takes its title from this observation.

Towards the end of the story, the narration presents two simultaneous sequences, first in parallel frames (see Figure 18). The central frame depicting the moon in the night sky which overlaps the two frames below is an indication that the events depicted are taking place at the same time on the same evening. On the left, the frame shows the crowds gathering for a protest at which singer Nina Malick is going to speak. On the right, the crowds assemble for an awards ceremony called the Tammies and various celebrities are depicted on the red carpet.

As the two events progress, gradually the text worlds merge and both worlds can be accessed in each single frame (Figure 19). The speech bubble at the top *without* the tail represents Nina Malick's words delivered during the protest. The speech bubbles *with* tails represent the utterances of the celebrities shown receiving their Tammies. Malick's eloquent speech is about the creation of an unthinking public controlled by the press via a constant stream of vacuous irrelevances concerning the celebrities they worship. She names in the bubbles here some of the ways in which the public have been hoodwinked and manipulated by the 'partisan media', which itself holds sway over the politicians. If the reader has not worked out before this point that the celebrities who act as political spokespeople are themselves clones, this is made obvious by the juxtaposition here of Malick's speech with images of those celebrities receiving their awards and spouting platitudes to a placid audience. In the closing pages of the narrative, Clementine is sacrificed to distract the public from Malick's campaign, and her body is discarded in a skip marked 'clinical waste'.

In this essay, I have provided an overview of the work of Teresa Bridgeman on text world theory and its application to verbo-visual texts. I have considered the interpretative work required of the reader to make sense of these texts and I have explored examples of different types of text world, with a focus on the narrator-world level. Finally, I have examined how shifts are effected between text worlds and also how text worlds can operate simultaneously.

Appendix A: Bridgeman's breakdown of the different types of text world

'DISCOURSE WORLD: the context for the "communication event" of the text, constituted by "participants" (here being author(s) and readers), and those parts of their environment which are relevant to the act of communication.

TEXT WORLD: the world constructed from the text itself, including the narrative world (if there is one), the textual-actual-world, and various subworlds. The text world may also include aspects of the discourse world, through reference to them.

NARRATIVE WORLD: Werth calls this the narrative envelope, suppressing its importance in fiction as a potentially discrete area of common ground between narrator and narratee (although he does distinguish between character-accessible subworlds, and participant-accessible subworlds). As all who are familiar with Genette (1972) are aware, the narrative world may be presented as either external or internal to the textual-actual-world, and this has significant implications for the way in which the reader builds it into his/her world model.

TEXTUAL-ACTUAL-WORLD: this is the world the characters inhabit and which they consider to be the discourse world.

SUBWORLDS: Werth describes three kinds of subworld: deictic, attitudinal and epistemic. The first group are "departures from the basic deictic "signature" of the conceptual world, e.g. "flashbacks", direct speech, "windows" on to other scenes". The second comprise "notions entertained by the protagonists, as opposed to actions undertaken by the protagonists in the discourse". Epistemic subworlds are produced by "modalised propositions expressed either by participants or characters" (Werth 1999: 216).'

Transcribed from Bridgeman 2005: 117-118

Appendix B: Illustrations

Figure 1: *Understanding Comics*

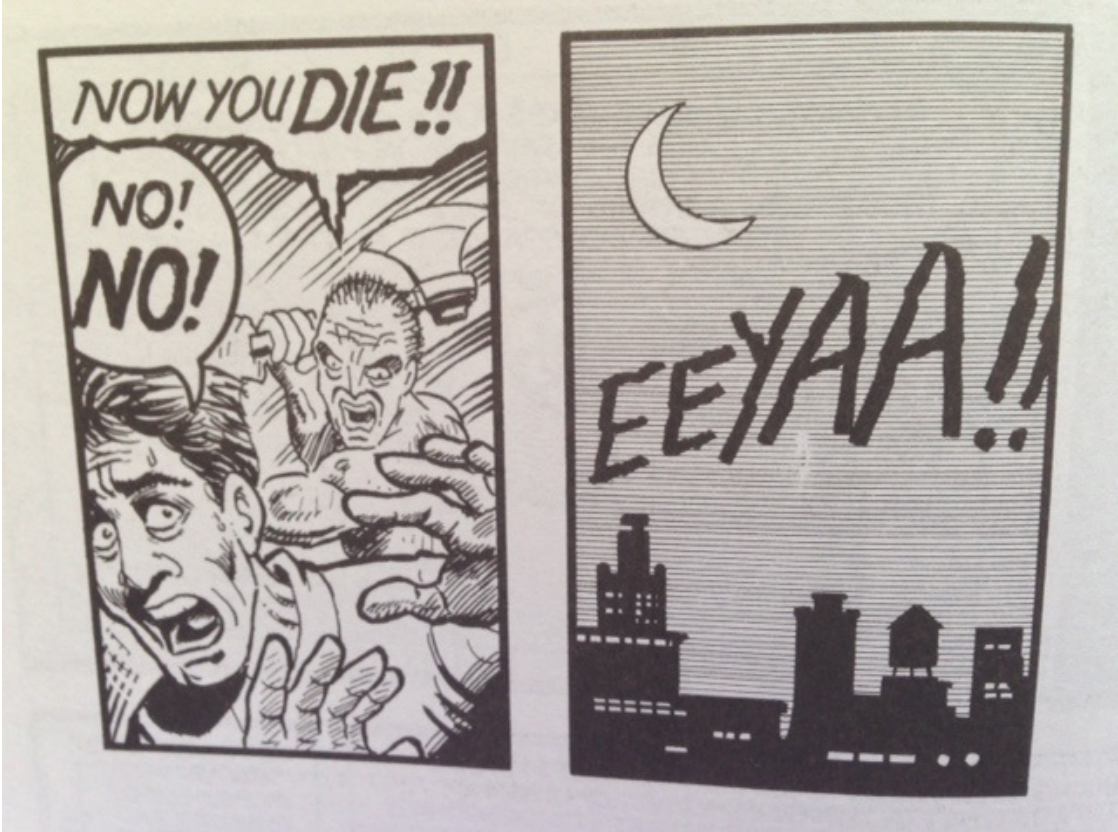


Figure 2: *Astérix Légionnaire*



Figure 3: *Harrow County*



Figure 4: *Harrow County*



Figure 5: *Harrow County*



Figure 6: *Fables Volume 10: The Good Prince*



Figure 7: *Spirits of the Dead*



Figure 8: *Spirits of the Dead*



Figure 9: *Spirits of the Dead*



Figure 10: *Lighter Than My Shadow*

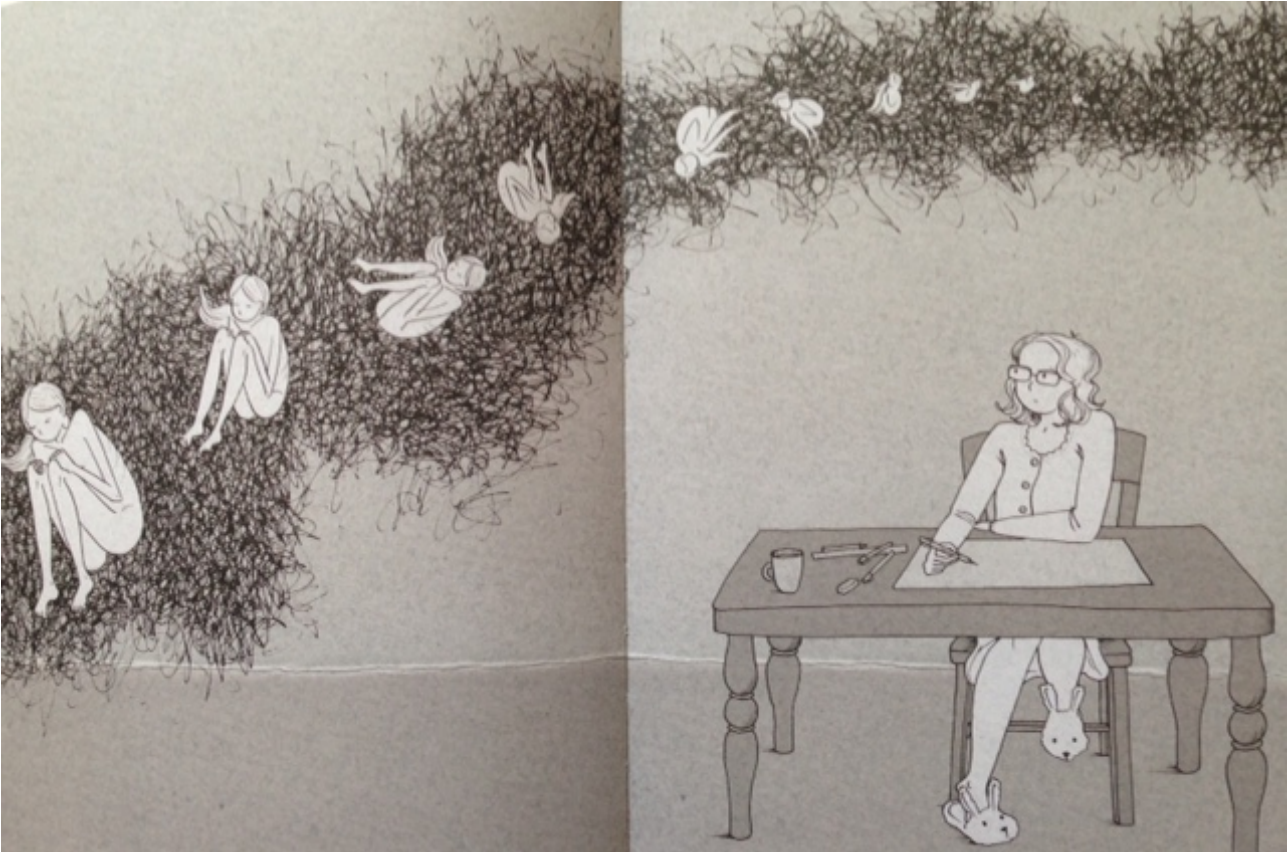


Figure 11: *Lighter Than My Shadow*

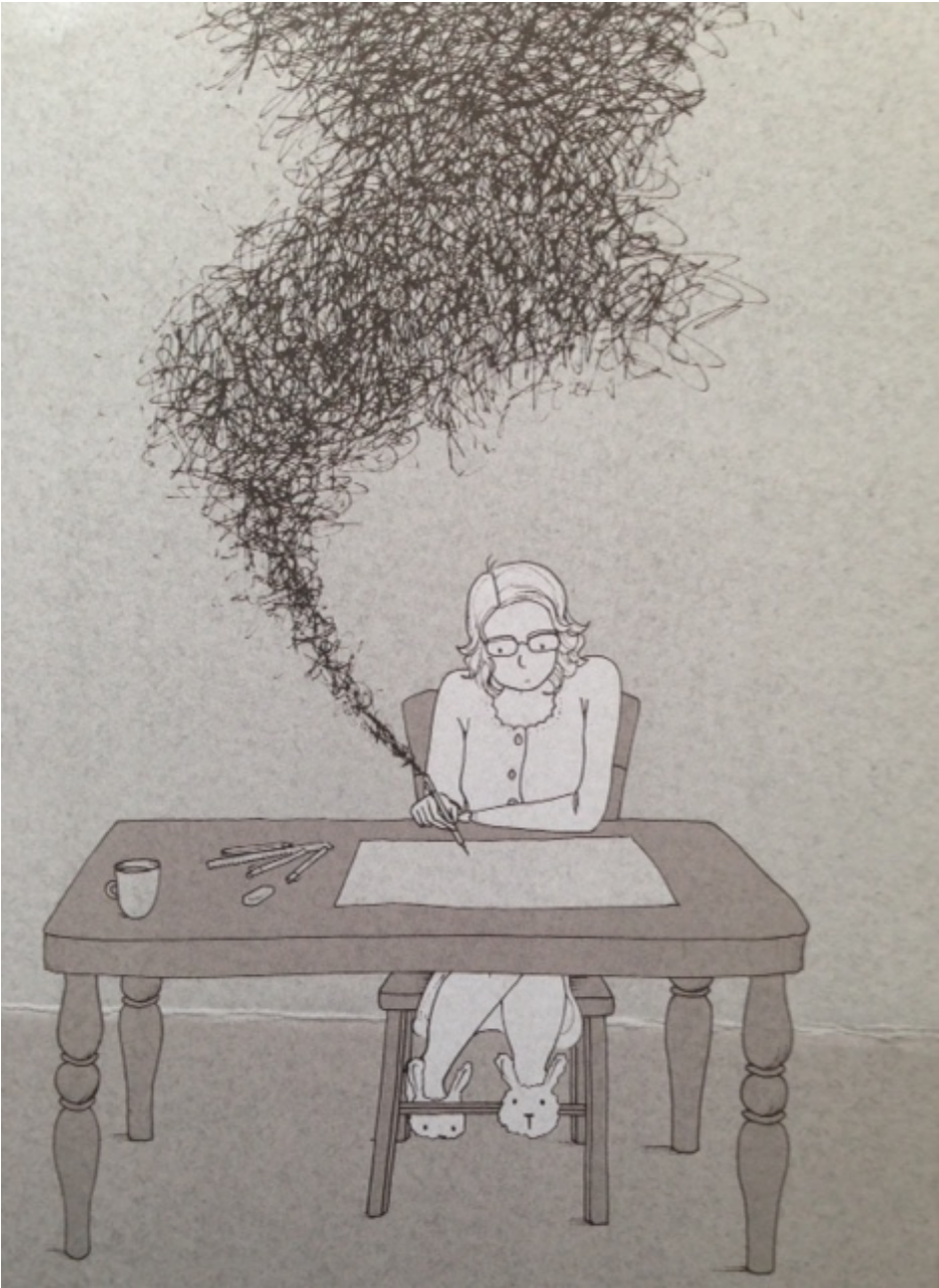


Figure 12: *Lighter Than My Shadow*



Figure 13: *Dotter of Her Father's Eyes*



Figure 14: *Dotter of Her Father's Eyes*

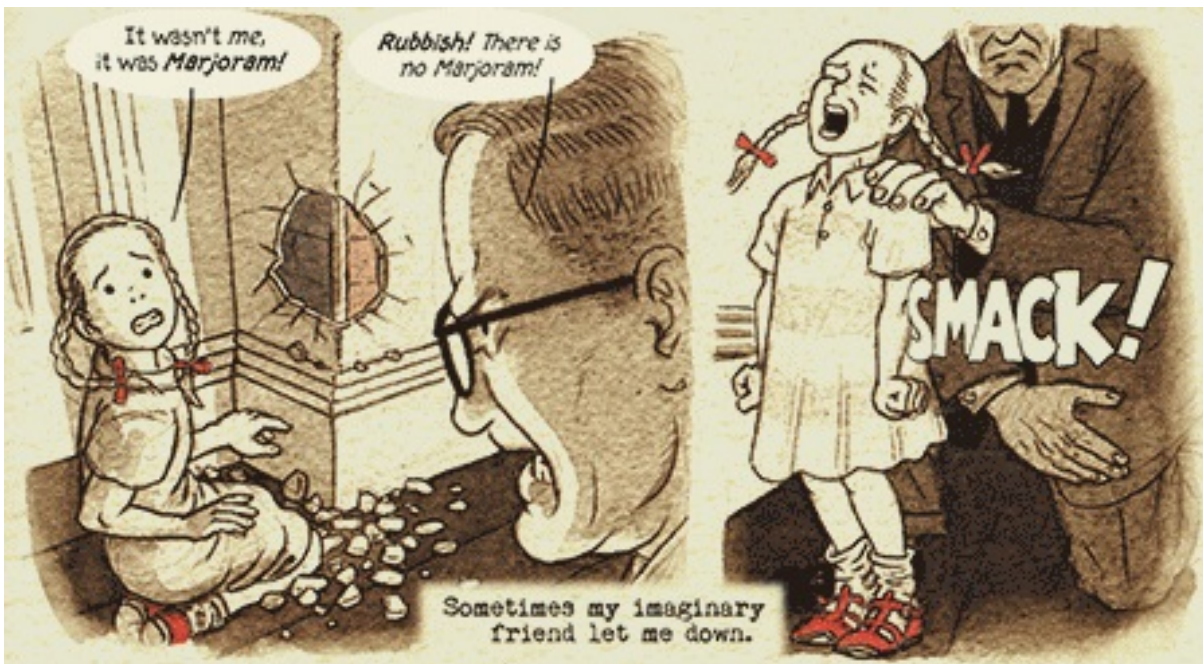


Figure 15: *Dotter of Her Father's Eyes*



Figure 16: *Harrow County*



Figure 17: *Harrow County*



Figure 18: *Livestock*



Figure 19: *Livestock*



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