

Trapped in the System

Sick and *The Hospital Suite* reviewed by Christina Maria Koch

Two deeply personal stories paint the big picture of what it means to be sick within and without medical institutions – an artistically masterful, sometimes painful, and yet often humorous read.

Gabby Schulz' *Sick* and John Porcellino's *The Hospital Suite* are autobiographical comics that both deal with the experience of developing a mystery illness – followed by tedious diagnostic efforts within the medical system, or by the agony of not being able to afford adequate care. In greatly differing styles but with similar strong roots in mini comics, zines, and small press culture, Porcellino's and Schulz' deeply personal stories paint the big picture of what it means to be sick within and without medical institutions – an artistically masterful, sometimes painful, and yet often humorous read.

Sick is a full-color webcomic story that Ignatz-award-winning Gabby Schulz has published to great acclaim on his website in six parts up to now. It starts off so matter-of-factly that everyone can relate: »A couple weeks ago I got sick.« The image thus captioned shows a head of hair under ruffled bed covers in a small cluttered room – a ruthlessly candid view on the private, perhaps even reminiscent of Tracey Emin's *My Bed* (1998) but with its unfortunate inhabitant still in place. However, this is no ordinary cold, the reader quickly realizes as the »claw [...] scooping out [the protagonist's] guts« is rendered in horrific

detail. Troubled not only by »shit looking like V-8 juice« (again, mercilessly portrayed), the protagonist also begins to spell out his mental torments: he cannot afford quality healthcare, he fears second-class (mis-)treatment, and he shies away ashamedly from bothering friends.



Fig. 1: Gabby Schulz: *Sick*.

Schulz contrasts a bleak account of an imagined trip to the Emergency Room as an uninsured patient (Fig. 1) with a bitterly ironic sugarcoated fantasy of soothing treatment if »a lucrative, stable career« had provided the protagonist with »the finest healthcare money can buy«. Moving away from cutting

political commentary, the narrative spins into a powerful meditation on suffering in solitude. A feeling of »negation« and the unfathomable existence of happy and healthy people outdoors locks the protagonist in an existential crisis depicted painfully and self-mockingly.

Most reviewers have been eager to stress that despite its bleakness, *Sick* is an engaging, even »entertaining« read. As paradoxical as this may sound, it is true: Schulz is a great storyteller and a versatile artist, and someone who often publishes autobiographic material. There is, of course, a problematic twist to this kind of praise: it risks instrumentalizing representations of distress and illness for an audience's catharsis, inspiration, or laughter. Although the protagonist of *Sick* remains unnamed, he is wryly described as a »broke 38-year-old »cartoonist«, and readers familiar with Schulz' work will recognize the similarity in appearance to his alter ego in *Monsters* (2009), published under the pseudonym of Ken Dahl. His background in political cartooning (born and raised in Hawai'i, he had a small gig at a local liberal newspaper) shows in apt caricatures of stereotypes: the naïve hippie, the redneck, the Christian fundamentalist. He often moves freely between clean, rounded lines of simplified cartoony characters, more intricate and »realistic« linework, and grotesque distortions that call to mind both horror and underground comics. But unlike his other comics, web or print, *Sick* makes ample use of webcomics characteristics. The images are oriented vertically and rarely constrained by rectangular panel borders. This supports the downward scrolling movement, as does the fact that *Sick* often features backgrounds that connect to neighboring images – such as the

bedcover turning into monstrous claws of sickness and worry that are evoked once again in digital ink blobs reaching upwards like fangs or fumes. The protagonist's plunge into despair is a quite literal one, and when Schulz shows us the »face« of pain, we scroll past several gothic black-and-gray monster mirror images that shapeshift into a grim self-portrait. These features attest to the broad and versatile palette of visual-verbal narrative devices that webcomics can use – or even develop. It also leaves us wondering how the long-announced plans for a completed version in print will adapt the stylistic and as yet open-ended narrative features of a story about which Gabby Schulz has said: »too much literaryness [sic!] or graphic-novelness or whatever – snuffs the life out of it« (qtd. in Falcetti).

Sick has been hugely popular on the web for several years now, but not everyone who has stumbled upon the strip is happy about it. Some commenters on web forums outside the comicsphere complain that the artist appears to be a self-pitying leftist failure, otherwise he would have manned up and sought help and a decent job. Ironically, these readers seem to have missed that *Sick* criticizes precisely this rhetoric of individual responsibility (this is before the advent of »Obamacare«), and still shows a destructive load of self-blame. True, it is unsettling to be offered a voyeuristic panorama of physical pain coupled with paralyzing self-doubt. Yet the unease should not stem from *Sick*'s unwillingness to conform to the common misconception that everyone has been a little depressed and able to snap out of it. The real discomfort should lie in the fact that a lack of understanding is sadly still a common response to widespread mental illnesses.

Whereas *Sick* leaves us mostly confined to a little room, witness to a lone sufferer, *The Hospital Suite* takes us into the space of the medical institution. John Porcellino, the creator of the famed mini-comics classic *King-Cat* (1989-), has written and drawn a 250-page narrative about his lengthy struggles with physical and mental health problems. The book is divided into three parts, »The Hospital Suite«, »1998«, and »True Anxiety«, and chronicles the surprising and life-shattering onset of illness, the long and winding roads of different treatments, towards a consolingly realistic kind of »I'm mostly okay now« closure common to many graphic illness memoirs. Part one takes us to the same crossroads at which Gabby Schulz' alter ego stands – agonizing stomach pain raises the question of going or not going to the hospital – except that when John dismissively says »How would we pay for it?«, his wife Kera objects »We've got insurance, John – from my job ...« (Porcellino, 17f.). That settled, the couple embark on a long diagnostic journey (Fig. 2).

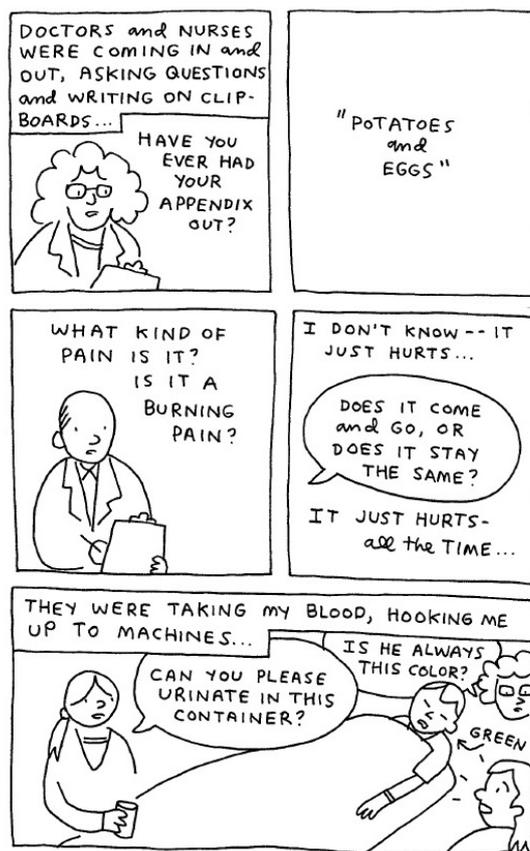
The Hospital Suite convincingly shows that pain may be a solitary and ultimately incommunicable experience, but that illness is a social

phenomenon. Examples may be the painful absence of care or, as in this case, Kera's role in taking care of John and in trying to make sense of his mysterious symptoms. The

vital connection that John feels to his loved ones is expressed in Porcellino's characteristically reduced style through a small heart symbol that frequently appears between characters (see Worden, 909f.) – it testifies to the complexity, emotional power, and quiet humor of his narrative that this seems genuine, not cheesy. Porcellino's »bare-bones drawings« (*Publishers Weekly*) – thin black lines that leave lots of white space, objects and characters drawn with minimal detail – make *The Hospital Suite* instantly recognizable. They are

also easily underestimated: as Robert Kirby has said, Porcellino's »pared-down approach to writing and drawing looks easy but it is actually quite difficult to master (there are no details to hide behind)«.

When John is finally on the road to physical recovery after a major abdominal surgery, the second part of the book starts, and with it the serious complications that anxiety and Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD) linked with yet another mystery syndrome bring



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Fig. 2: John Porcellino: *The Hospital Suite*.

to his social life and marriage, which eventually falls apart. After countless tests and inefficient remedies, John concludes »The more time I spend in doctors’ offices, the sicker I feel!« and takes a break from the medical establishment, a decision that is footnoted as »not medical advice – signed, John’s lawyer« (Porcellino, 146).

John does return to doctors’ and therapists’ offices in part three of the book, but on his own terms and accompanied by a lot of personal research. He eventually finds out enough about what is wrong and how it can be helped so that he (and the book) finds a sort of closure. Contrary to Schulz’ webcomic, which shows how much time can stretch when you are sick and alone with your thoughts, Porcellino’s narrative deals with the challenge of having to condense many years of suffering, tests, treatments, and waiting into just three overlapping narrative strands. One does not have to be a mini-comics or diary comics geek (although I do recommend Schulz’ /Dahl’s and Porcellino’s other works) to appreciate these



The Hospital Suite

John Porcellino
 Montreal: Drawn and Quarterly, 2014
 264 S., 22,95 US Dollar
 ISBN 978-1-77046-164-2

deeply personal narratives, stories that manage to convey extreme discomfort with empathy-evoking frankness and wry humor.

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Sick

Gabby Schulz
 <<http://www.gabbysplayhouse.com>>
 Last accessed 09/14/2015.