

BOOK REVIEW

BOOK REVIEW: GRAPHIC REPRODUCTION

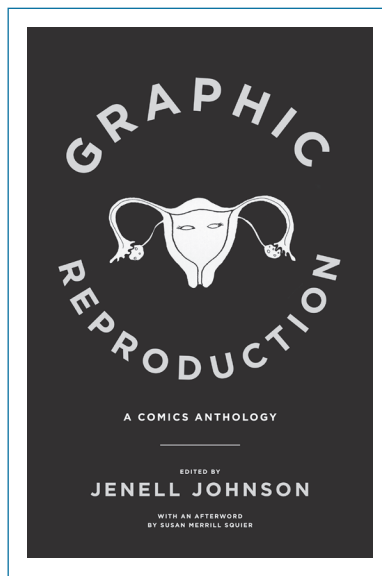
Tiffany I. Leung, MD, MPH, FACP, FAMIA

Dr. Leung (t.leung@maastrichtuniversity.nl) is an assistant professor at the Faculty of Health, Medicine and Life Sciences and PhD candidate at the Care and Public Health Research Institute at Maastricht University in The Netherlands.

When I started reading *Graphic Reproduction: A Comics Anthology*, edited by artist Jenelle Johnson,¹ the then news cycle in November included coverage of another book, former first lady Michelle Obama's new memoir, *Becoming*. "I felt lost and alone and I felt like I failed because I didn't know how common miscarriages were, because we don't talk about them," she had said in an interview.² *Graphic Reproduction* accomplishes this—and more—through artful narrative, opening the emotional conversations so desperately needed about sensitive topics in reproduction, including the trials of infertility. This book, a collection of comics on reproduction, does so in an accessible and sometimes painfully honest way.

True to its title, the book is in the genre of *graphic medicine*, a growing field that "combines the discourse of medicine with the medium of comics," according to Johnson. This visual approach has been applied to patient education and communication, as well as medical education.³ Furthermore, graphic stories are effective in depicting the experience of illness for patients and doctors, and for teaching humanism and empathy in medical education.

Graphic Reproduction is a compilation of 13 comics intended to reflect on the complexity of reproduction, "a merging of personal and political, body and ideology, individual and institution, science and technology, joy and pain, nature and culture, sex and gender, humor and horror, seeing and saying." The styles of art vary, as do the points of view and dialogue, which make for an easy read of each graphic story in any order over a period of several days or in one sitting.



In the introduction, Johnson describes graphic medicine for the uninitiated reader, then continues to briefly describe her own experience of infertility. She also describes the histories of each comic and illustrator and their social and political contexts at the times of their original publication, spanning from 1973 to 2017. She explicitly aims to be gender-inclusive in her selection of comics, including a story from a would-be father, and two stories about pregnancy for individuals with non-heteronormative gender identities (in "Pregnant Butch" and "Spawn of Dykes to Watch Out For"). Most of the comics do still focus on

heteronormative relationships and family structures, but her inclusivity is especially distinguishing.

In the first two comics, the book launches unflinchingly into one of the most controversial topics in reproduction: abortion. The first comic feels undeniably dated in its colloquialisms and illustrated social and class stereotypes, which are to an extent excusable given the original comic was published in 1973. The aim was to describe the changes in federal law—*Roe v. Wade* had just concluded—by illustrating a group of women of different backgrounds who are seeking abortions for various reasons; they find support and sympathy among "sisters" in this educational comic on abortion. Interestingly, the comic was created in collaboration with a number of women's health groups, most notably Planned Parenthood, which in November 2018 appointed emergency medicine physician Leana Wen, MD, as its new president.⁴ The second comic, shorter and originally published in 2015, reads more like patient-education material, illustrating and describing medical and surgi-

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cal abortion procedures in simple language. A later comic intended to educate about postpartum depression, illustrates a clinical psychologist who breaks the fourth wall to speak to and educate the reader.

The most memorable of the graphic stories are those of infertility. The honesty and rawness of the stories told, some fictional and some autobiographical, channel an unfettered depth of despair associated with the death of an unborn child that is not acknowledged nearly enough as it needs to be. At the same time, a recurring theme is that such conversations need to be normalized to help those affected by such devastating loss to heal. In one comic, Endrené Shephard illustrates after a miscarriage, “As I opened up to others, they opened up to me...It turned out that I had joined one of the planet’s most miserable (mostly secret) societies.” In other words, women who experience miscarriages often grieve alone, and the self-perception of failure or inadequacy, which Michelle Obama also expressed, can be crushing. However, the reality is that miscarriages and infertility are far more common than the public is led to believe. In this way, despite the heaviness of the content, the choice of comics in this book offer a wide-open door through which to walk—not just peek—into the heartbreaking experiences of wanting but being unable to become a mother.

While some stories express a hollowing of the heart bored by feelings of incompleteness, others demonstrate a degree of lightness, usually in the form of a thin veil of sarcasm that tries only barely to hide the strange distortions of everyday life that are the consequences of invasive and costly procedures related to infertility treatments. “We

started calling the frozen embryos the ‘JV team,’ and gave them all names from ‘Friday Night Lights,’” says Johnson in an illustrated panel from her own comic. In another one-page comic on becoming mother, “Anatomy of a New Mom,” Carol Ann Tyler illustrates a caricature of a disheveled woman with “Unshaved legs (low priority)” and “the ‘Forget It’ zone” with an enormous “X” over the pelvic region, among many other annotations to the cartoon. Although published in 1988, the content here, and in all of the stories, is still evergreen.

I found, as a childless female physician in my mid-thirties, the comic by Paula Knight, to be most relatable: in a strip containing little dialogue, an anthropomorphized uterus (also gracing the book’s cover) literally tugs at her, with a hand-like fallopian tube, after her thirtieth birthday to remind her of a biological countdown beginning. Johnson, in her own comic, had written, “It seemed like every person I knew either had kids or was pregnant. Party conversations had shifted considerably.”

As inclusive as this book is, still missing are the stories of choosing not to have children, delaying having children, egg cryopreservation for a later date, and adoption. As a book on “Graphic Reproduction,” almost all of the comics revolve around pregnancy, presumably because this is the biological point of convergence in reproduction, regardless of fertility status or gender identity. Nonetheless, the pathways to creating a family in contemporary social contexts are much broader and I believe would warrant a second volume of this comic anthology.

Overall, the sensible selection and easy readability of the comics contained in this anthology are in-

formative and satisfying to read. In a time when striving for gender equity has never been stronger and more vocal in the medical profession,⁵ family life is impossible to omit from the conversation. Consequently, at least one of these comics will be relatable to most readers. Even if personal experiences are not among the stories, there is still recognition that dialogue about these difficult issues is needed. This book can facilitate those conversations. In fact, a discussion guide and exercises are included at the end of the book.

I recommend Johnson’s *Graphic Reproduction*, a quick read that engages readers of all backgrounds in this thoughtfully constructed graphic medicine anthology.

References

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