End of the Line: Examining Death through Graphic Medicine

**Can’t We Talk About Something More Pleasant? : A Memoir**

*By Roz Chast*

**Things to do in a Retirement Home Trailer Park…When You’re 29 and unemployed**

*By Aneurin Wright*

IDH2930 14DC

Spring 2018; Monday, 8th period, 3:00-3:50pm

**Location:** LIT0119

**Instructors:** Ariel Pomputius

[apomputius@ufl.edu](mailto:apomputius@ufl.edu); 352-273-8441

Mary Edwards

[meedwards@ufl.edu](mailto:meedwards@ufl.edu); 352-273-8421

*Office hours scheduled upon request*

**Goals and Objectives:**

Course Goal -

By engaging with both graphic novels you will compare and contract stylistic differences and explore varied perspectives of how humans experience the profound issues of caregiving for terminally ill loved ones, death, and the grief that results from loss.

At the end of this course you should be able to:

Objectives –

1. Explore how graphic medicine and creative expression contribute to health and the healing process including issues related to death, dying, and grief.
2. Interpret how our responses to caregiving for the terminally ill or dying influence grief and coping by comparing two different graphic narratives.
3. Examine how stigma regarding end-of-life issues influences society, communities, and individuals.
4. Question how various perspectives on coping with death, dying, and the grief process encourage empathy.

**Class Description:**

By juxtaposing two different, but complementary, accounts of caring for a dying family member as told by the graphic memoirs Can’t We Talk About Something More Pleasant? and Things to Do in a Retirement Home Trailer Park, this class delves into end-of-life issues, death, and grief through the lens of graphic medicine. Stories about terminal illness, aging, end-of-life care and grief, as told by caregivers, help address the fear, stigma, and confusion around the experience of human death and dying.

Emerging within the last decade as an area of study, graphic medicine combines the personal stories of narrative medicine with the visuals of a graphic novel or comic book. While graphic medical novels can entertain, they are also uniquely suited to tell more serious stories. The personal accounts shared in a graphic memoir are brought to life in a poignant and thought-provoking way through the artful combination of words and images. While the books included in this proposal use both words and images to skillfully share the concerns and trials of the narrators, the visual aesthetic of pages without words often have the stronger impact, allowing imagery to facilitate the narrator’s introspection and reflection and capture the reader in this process when verbal communication cannot adequately express the depth of their emotion. As MK Czerwiec, author of the graphic medicine novel Taking Turns and a former hospice nurse, says, graphic medicine “can serve as a window into the lives of our patients and their families, providing images, stories, perspectives we are unlikely to elicit from a bedside or clinic visit or from a textual narrative alone.” In a culture that hails health and wellness, reading stories about terminal illness and aging encourages deep thought and consideration of issues including end-of-life care, death, and bereavement, which may seem strange and uncomfortable. Examining these issues through the context of a graphic memoir makes the subject matter more approachable while maintaining both the brevity and deeply personal nature of the narrator’s account.

Can’t We Talk About Something More Pleasant? by Roz Chast tells the story of a woman supporting her parents in the slow decline of old age and end-of-life care. Though the subject matter is grave, the artist approaches the topic with respect and love, even as she honestly accounts her trepidation and regrets over difficult family relationships. Focusing on similar subject matter, Things to Do in a Retirement Home Trailer Park by Aneurin Wright shares the author’s story of caring for his terminally ill father and processing his grief in the aftermath. Both memoirs address the realities of end-of-life concerns and the complications caused by rallying a family around the dying despite complex and challenging interpersonal dynamics, but the style of the books is very different. Chast’s drawings are bright sketches and longer narrations mixed with personal photographs flesh out her story while Wright uses a more traditional comicbook style, but offers more thought-provoking interludes of images without text. While the books’ caregiving situations and grief mirror each other, the stories differ in terms of the context of the end-of-life care. Wright’s father dies from the terminal illness emphysema caused by a lifetime of smoking whereas Chast’s mother and father succumb to the natural decline of aging. Both accounts remind the reader that even in the midst of suffering and death, there is love and support from family and friends. By engaging with both graphic novels, students will not only be able to compare and contract stylistic differences, but also explore varied perspectives of how humans experience the profound issues of caregiving for terminally ill loved ones, death, and the grief that results from loss.

**Class Schedule and Reading Assignments\***

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| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Date | Topic | Readings/Supplemental Readings | Assignments |
| January 8 | Introduction |  |  |
| January 15 | Martin Luther King Jr. Day—No class | | |
| January 22 | What is Graphic Medicine? | Graphic Medicine Manifesto   * Introduction   Chast:   * Introduction * Chapter 1 & 2   Wright:   * Prologue * Counting Pills * Learning about Hospice | In-class presentations start  First Reflective Journal Entry Due |
| January 29 | Guest Lecture:  Tom Hart,  Sequential Artists Workshop | Chast:   * Chapter 3 & 4   Wright:   * Clearing Customs * Mobility * Resection |  |
| February 5 | Graphic Pathology & Health Care Providers | Chast:   * Chapter 5 & 6   Wright:   * Caretaking * Secretarial * Housecalls 1 | Project Proposals |
| February 12 | Recognizing the End | Chast:   * Chapter 7 & 8   Wright:   * Reconciliation * (mis)communication * Vengeance | Proposal feedback returned |
| February 19 | Bureaucracy of Aging | Chast:   * Chapter 9   Wright:   * Interlude * Visitor * Falling | Advanced directive assignment |
| February 26 | Helplessness | Chast:   * Chapter 10   Wright:   * Bathtime * Swimming * Renting |  |
| March 5 | Spring Break—No Class | | |
| March 12 | Humor | Chast:   * Chapter 11   Wright:   * Housecalls 2 * Wagon * Reconciliation |  |
| March 19 | Reconciling with Family | Chast:   * Chapter 12   Wright:   * If * Fathers & sons * interlude |  |
| March 26 | Near the End | Chast:   * Chapter 13   Wright:   * Needs * Housecalls 3 | Final Project check-in (informal) |
| April 2 | Death | Chast:   * Chapter 14 & 15   Wright:   * Interlude * Reconciliation 3 * Yes |  |
| April 9 | Graphic Medicine and Grief | Chast:   * Chapter 16 & 17   Wright:   * Neighbors * Nomenclature * Void |  |
| April 16 | What Happens After | Chast:   * Chapter 18 * Epilogue   Wright:   * Packing bags * Road trip * Drawing * Post script | In-class presentations end  Final Reflective Journal Entry Due |
| April 23 | Wrap-up Discussions |  | Final Projects Due |

\* Please come prepared having read the assigned chapters listed for each class day.

**Flexibility Clause:**

We reserve the right to modify the class schedule listed above as needed. Any changes will be made well in advance and you will be immediately notified. Conflicts that arise due to a change in schedule can be discussed with us and will not be held against you. Scheduled Reading Assignments and Graded Assignments should not change, except due to unforeseen circumstances.

**Requirements:**

Note: all assignments must be completed in order to receive credit for the class.

1. Complete reading as assigned and be prepared to discuss in class.
2. Attend a minimum of 13 classes.
3. Graded assignments must be submitted on time. Assignments submitted after the deadline will immediately lose points.

**Graded Assignments**

1. **In-Class Presentations and Meditations**

Each student is responsible for leading the first 5-10 minutes of two class periods, one will be a brief presentation on a graphic medicine novel of your choosing (there’s a list of suggested titles at the end of the syllabus) and one will be a brief meditation on some aspect of death and dying. The meditation may be a poem, some other reading, a recorded piece of music, a work of art, a photograph, a magazine/newspaper article, etc. Creativity is encouraged.

1. **Reflective Journal**

Throughout the course students will complete at least three reflective journal entries. Each entry must be at one page and can contain double spaced narrative writing, drawings, or any combination of the two. Journal entries are due near the beginning, middle, and end of the course (specific dates for the first and final entries are indicated in the schedule above) and are timed to allow you to not only reflect on the readings, but also express and process your thoughts and emotions at key points. Students will be allowed to choose the due date of the second entry based on their own reflection and processing needs.

1. **Final Project**

The final project should integrate insights learned from the course. You may choose to do an academic paper addressing a topic of graphic medicine or a creative work, such as a short graphic novel.

Academic Paper:

* 5-7 pages
* double-spaced
* 12pt Times New Roman font
* MLA citations

Graphic Narrative/Comic:

* 3-8 pages

**Grading:**

* Attendance and in-class participation 30%
* Presentations and meditations (15% each) 30%
* Final Project (includes on-time proposal) 25%
* Reflective Journal (5% for each entry) 15 %

**Attendance:** Attendance in this course is mandatory. One absence will be allowed without a deduction of points; every absence beyond one will result in a reduction of 10 points from the final grade. One additional absence documented by a doctor’s note can be made up through special write up.

**Academic Honesty:** All students sign the following statement upon registration at the University of Florida: “I understand that the University of Florida expects its students to be honest in all their academic work. I agree to adhere to this commitment to academic honesty and understand that my failure to comply with this commitment may result in disciplinary action up to and including expulsion from the University.” As instructors for this course, we fully support the intent of the above statement and will not tolerate academic dishonesty.

**Student Responsibility:** Students are responsible for understanding all course policies and for accessing all course materials on the UF E-Learning Website through the URL listed above. All assignments should be submitted through the website and in hard copy when requested. Students are also responsible for checking their UF e-mail account for course notifications and for communicating with the instructors related to any situation that may hinder his or her progress or participation in the course.

**Disabilities:** Students requesting classroom accommodation must first register with the Dean of Students Office. The Dean of Students Office will provide documentation to the instructor when students request accommodation.

**Suggestions for Graphic Medicine Novels**

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| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Title and Author | Topic | Available at HSCL | Available at public library |
| *Daytripper*by Fábio Moon & Gabriel Bá | Aging |  | X |
| *Aliceheimer’s: Alzheimer’s Through the Looking Glass* by Dana Walrath | Alzheimer’s | X |  |
| *Tangles: A Story about Alzheimer’s, My Mother, and Me*by Sarah Leavitt | Alzheimer’s |  | X |
| *100 Months: The End of All Things*by John Hicklenton | Death |  | X |
| *Displacement*by Lucy Knisley | Death |  | X |
| *Doctors*by Dash Shaw | Death |  | X |
| *Special Exits: A Graphic Memoir*by Joyce Farmer | Death |  | X |
| *Bird in a Cage*by Rebecca Roher | Dementia |  | X |
| *Rosalie Lightning*by Tom Hart | Grief |  | X |
| *Taking Turns: Stories from HIV/AIDS Care Unit 371*by MK Czerwiec | HIV/AIDS | X | X |
| *Pedro & Me: Friendship, Loss, & What I Learned* by Judd Winick | HIV/AIDS | X |  |
| *Psychiatric Tales: Eleven Graphic Stories about Mental Illness* by Darryl Cunningham | Mental Health | X | X |
| *Pain is Really Strange* by Steve Haines | Pain | X |  |
| *My Degeneration: A Journey Through Parkinson’s*by Peter Dunlap-Shohl | Parkinson’s | X | X |
| *Trauma is Really Strange* by Steve Haines & Sophie Standing | Trauma | X |  |
| *Maus: A Survivor’s Tale*by Art Spiegelman | Trauma |  | X |
| *Alan’s War: The Memories of G.I. Alan Cope* by Emmanuel Guibert | Veteran Health | X | X |
| *Soldier’s Heart: The Campaign to Understand my WWII Veteran Father: A Daughter’s Memoir*by Carol Tyler | Veteran Health |  | X |

Books in this list are recommendations, not requirements. Please feel free to find your own resources and talk to your instructors if you have any questions, but talk to your instructors before you present on readings outside of this list.