



Bitter Medicine: A Graphic Memoir of Mental Illness

Clem Martini , Olivier Martini

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In 1976, Ben Martini was diagnosed with schizophrenia. A decade later, his brother Olivier was told he had the same disease. For the past thirty years the Martini family has struggled to comprehend and cope with a devastating illness, frustrated by a health care system lacking in resources and empathy, the imperfect science of medication, and the strain of mental illness on familial relationships.

Throughout it all, Olivier, an accomplished visual artist, drew. His sketches, comic strips, and portraits document his experience with, and capture the essence of, this all too frequently misunderstood disease. In "Bitter Medicine," Olivier's poignant graphic narrative runs alongside and communicates with a written account of the past three decades by his younger brother, award-winning author and playwright Clem Martini. The result is a layered family memoir that faces head-on the stigma attached to mental illness.

Shot through with wry humour and unapologetic in its politics, "Bitter Medicine" is the story of the Martini family, a polemical and poetic portrait of illness, and a vital and timely call for action.

Bitter Medicine: A Graphic Memoir of Mental Illness Details

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From Reader Review Bitter Medicine: A Graphic Memoir of Mental Illness for online ebook

Victoria Hirsche says

This book is an easy read as much as it is an impossible one. It is well written, gripping, and accompanied by intriguing artwork which means I sped through this book quickly and easily. However it is also a terribly hard story which weighs on you. I found myself weeping by the end of the story, and the injustices underlined by this book are hard to swallow. I do believe that everyone should read this book, but it is especially mandatory for people working with marginalized populations.

Trevor says

A compassionate look at the stark reality of schizophrenia patients and the gaps in our mental health care system since deinstitutionalization. "I'd argue that individuals with mental health issues currently receive second-class care in our health care system, and that there are not just cracks in the mental health system, but gaping chasms that people with mental health problems drop through on a regular basis" (p. 218).

Sasha Boersma says

When I first started to read the book, I wasn't sure of it. But I needed to push through it for research (instead of my typical tactic of abandoning the text), and I'm glad I did.

I felt the book actually read as 2 parts making the whole, the first about the family coming to terms with with mental illness, and the second being a first-person critique of Canada's health care system (or lack thereof) regarding psychiatric treatment. Even though the family's experiences were in Alberta, I saw similarities to experiences of those in Ontario (in Canada, while health care is publicly funded, it is managed by the different provinces, not nationally).

The juxtaposition of the two brother's stories, one in prose and the other in graphic form also helps to demonstrate the thoughts and feelings of someone suffering through mental illness.

Difficult read because it is painful to feel emotionally, but it is a story we should be aware of.

PS - the Toronto library files the book under "graphic novel", but I feel strongly it is should be reclassified under the category for psychology as it should not be dismissed as an important body of work in psych literature.

Chris says

A touching, poignant, well-written and honest memoir about members of a family that has too much taken from it by incurable schizophrenia, the underfunded, indifferent mental healthcare system that fails them on

too many levels, too many times, their own determination and loyalty to one another and the help they do receive from resource-starved NGOs.

Many things from this book will stay with me, including this: "A recent study indicated that the number of people in American jails with mental illness has grown so drastically over the past decades that the U.S. prison system now constitutes the single-largest mental health care provider in America. The situation in Canada is little better."

Colin says

I read this because it's the focus text for an undergrad reading workshop I'm leading this afternoon. It's marvellous. The two narratives, two perspectives, communicated by Clem and his brother Olivier are at times augmentary, combative, illusory and are always insightful. The experience of both psychological and institutional breakdown experienced by the authors in an austerity-driven Alberta of the 1990s provides both an affective reading experience and much needed caution to the systems that currently hold no place for an illness they can't profit from. I highly recommend reading this book.

marvellings says

In 1976, Clem Martini's younger brother Ben was diagnosed with schizophrenia. Shortly after, he committed suicide. Ten years later, Clem's older brother Olivier was given the same diagnosis. *Bitter Medicine* serves as both a deeply personal narrative exploring the effects of this illness on Liv and his family, and a striking indictment of the failures of the Canadian mental health care system.

What *Bitter Medicine* does so well is demonstrate the day-to-day struggles of mental illness: constantly navigating unintelligible institutions, interacting with underpaid or unsympathetic personnel, weighing the benefits of unpredictable medications against often life-threatening costs. And underneath it all, everyone has to grapple with the raw uncertainty: just what kind of life will be possible for Liv and his loved ones?

This is more of an illustrated text than a graphic novel, per se. As such, I sometimes felt the text and the illustrations interrupted each other's flow. But at other times, Clem's pointed prose and Olivier's scrawling sketches juxtaposed and augmented each other perfectly—like the hospitalization experience at the end, where each brother trades off telling their side of the same story.

Clem writes, "Sometimes [Liv] tells me that I don't understand the way things are. And I'm certain that sometimes he's right. How could I? He's lived an experience that I have only observed." But both brothers lived through this illness, and in *Bitter Medicine* each has documented their experience in their own, deeply profound way.

Alexis says

This book was absolutely amazing, and I wish more people would read it. Clem Martini, a Calgary based writer, writes about his family's struggles with schizophrenia. The drawings are contributed by his

schizophrenic brother.

This is a real, raw and often sad book that looks at how the Canadian health care system and many other systems ignore and hurt people who are mentally ill. I question anyone who can read this book and not be moved or angered.

Marion says

A poignant family memoir by Clem (text) and Olivier (drawings) Martini, this book is a must read for anyone who has experienced mental illness themselves or in their family and has tried to negotiate the mental health system in Alberta.

Peacegal says

This isn't a comic, but rather an illustrated nonfiction book. As I see so many examples of mental illness on a daily basis at work, this book was of great interest to me. The sections detailing the shuttering of mental health services and how so many mentally ill people end up homeless were especially informative and thought-provoking.

Mateen Mahboubi says

An honest and challenging exploration about the authors' experience with mental health in their family. Clem tells the story of the caregiver, dealing with the frustrations of working in a flawed and underfunded system. Oliver tells his story in drawings and simple text. Both of them together combine for a powerful and challenging read.

Lorraine says

This touching memoir is an insight into the roller coaster life of a family coping with schizophrenia. You will be sad, angry, happy, as Clem Martini pens the story and his schizophrenic brother Olivier, sketches his emotions throughout.

I highly recommend this book as it creates awareness of a devastating illness, the trauma of medication roulette for the patient and family, and the failure of de-institutionalization.

K Z says

If you are working in a field that is at all related to mental health (or just in the healthcare field in general) then I would highly recommend this book. It gives a startling inside look to schizophrenia and how those living with it are treated as well as a perspective of what it is like to be the family member of someone with schizophrenia. I know there are lots of other sources on this topic that I'm sure are equally as informative and

interesting. This one just has a bit of a twist with a being a graphic memoir. It's also created by two brothers, one of whom has schizophrenia.

Debbie says

Heartbreaking. Excellent portrayal of one family's travel through the maze of mental illness treatment. Should be read by ALL social workers and health care workers -- and politicians, too..

Margaret Robbins says

This book was definitely an interesting read, and it will help me with a current project I am doing on comics that represent mental health issues. It definitely makes important statements of how traditional healthcare sometimes fails people with mental health issues. What I found uplifting about the book is how much the family support mattered to Liv and how his connections to his family truly saved him. Also, I loved how Clem did the writing and Liv did the drawings. Artistic collaborations between people who truly love each other make for great work. This is definitely worth reading!

Liz Lazzara says

The best book I have read to date about experiencing mental illness, as the diagnosed and as a family member. It outlines all the major problems with the system that I have experienced, clearly and with strength. A must read, for all.
