Fast Tracks to Narrative Empathy: 
Anthropomorphism and Dehumanization 
in Graphic Narratives

Suzanne Keen

Fast tracks for human emotional responses precede cognitive processes, according to the neuroscientific investigation of emotions such as anger and empathy\(^1\) and the psychology of “mind-reading,” via fast, unconscious recognition of facial expressions.\(^2\) Even simplified line drawings of facial expressions\(^3\) activate the “quick and dirty”\(^4\) subcortical bases of emotions that are followed by slightly slower cognitive responses routed through the neocortex. In comics and graphic narratives, illustrations of faces and bodily postures may capitalize on the availability of visual coding for human emotions, eliciting readers’ feelings before they even read the accompanying text.\(^5\) Little is known, however, about the relationship between the emotional responses evoked by visual artists’ strategies of anthropomorphizing animal faces or dehumanizing people’s faces and bodies, on the one hand, and the invitations to narrative empathy proffered by graphic storytelling, on the other hand. Drawing on my previous work on empathy vis-à-vis print narratives (see Keen, *Empathy* and “Strategic Empathizing”), the current essay explores the opportunities and challenges that graphic narratives pose for research in this domain. Specifically, I seek to open a conversation about the impact of emotionally charged sequences of word-image combinations used in the service of what I term *ambassadorial strategic empathy*. At issue are graphic narratives that reach popular audiences (including teenaged readers) with appeals for recognition and justice and ambitions to form citizens’ sense of responsibility for suffering others.

I focus on two case studies that highlight how questions of medium specificity need to be taken into account in research on narrative empathy. J. P. Stassen’s (2000, trans. 2006) *Deogratias: A Tale of Rwanda*, a graphic narrative about a boy caught up as an unwilling participant in the Rwandan civil war and genocide, renders dehumanization vividly: the boy turns into an animal in four stark frames of transformation. Brian K. Vaughan’s 2006 *Pride of Baghdad* (art by Niko Henrichon) employs more traditional anthropomorphism to depict the perspectives of a group of lions escaped from the Baghdad Zoo during the invasion of Iraq. Both narratives employ what I have theorized as *ambassadorial strategic empathy*
to elicit readers’ emotional response to victims caught up in wars not of their own making. *Strategic narrative empathy* on the part of authors indicates their manipulation of potential target audiences through deliberate representational choices designed to sway the feelings of their readers (though actual readers’ responses vary). *Ambassadorial strategic empathy* attempts to reach readers outside the boundaries of the depicted social world in an effort to change attitudes and even solicit assistance in the real world (Keen, “Strategic Empathizing” 478-80). Typically, an author employing ambassadorial empathy addresses chosen others with the aim of cultivating their empathy and at least implying an appeal for justice, assistance, or recognition (483).

Such considerations raise the question of the intended audience and their likely responsiveness. While the relatively high quality of serious graphic narratives has in recent years attracted an older, more educated, and more diverse audience, comic books have been historically denigrated as the ephemeral reading of immature male adolescents. Widely regarded as an addictive form of story-telling, comics have not typically been credited with the capacity to invite catharsis or narrative empathy leading to socially beneficial action in the real world. Instead, they have often been castigated as trash devised to seduce the semi-literate (see Pratt). Stassen plays with this generic history when he shows his young protagonist, the pubescent Deogratias, attempting to win favor with a girl by giving her a romantic magazine of *romans-photos*, *Rêves and Passions*. Narratives of this kind work by evoking fantasy empathy for the lovers in the story, providing escapist pleasure-reading through frames like film-stills. But do they make readers into lovers? Deogratias discovers right off that the transaction between representation of romantic love and acquiescence to his advances is not so straightforward. The girl rejects both. The chain of transmission of affective purpose that runs from author to audience cannot be so confidently scripted. While this may appear consoling in the context of graphic narrative’s promiscuous transmission of desire, it also means that morally worthy intentions, even overt didactic purposes, often fall short of their persuasive goals. Thus Stassen acknowledges within his text that the uses of graphic narration are not as predictable as the naïve boy imagines, even as he attempts to use his art to raise readers’ consciousness of the bloody recent history of Rwanda.

Whether they are motivated by the desire to effect social change or not, many narrative artists aim at moving readers’ feelings, and graphic narration brings a tool kit of visual arts techniques to enhance the effort. Two factors converge in considering these particular graphic narratives’ capacity to evoke readers’ empathy. First, the deployment of anthropomorphized animal characters (a strategy with a long history in narrative
literature, as well as in cartoons and comics) evokes culturally scripted responses to familiar schemas of sympathetic and antipathetic animals.\textsuperscript{6} In literary terms this means that animal character types associated with specific genres and modes generate expectations of their own. Second, the depiction of facial expressions and bodily postures to convey emotional states (that may or may not be glossed verbally) calls upon readers’ neural systems for recognition of basic emotions.\textsuperscript{7} Visual artists working in graphic narrative media adopt the culturally familiar versions of these human facial expressions and bodily postures in their anthropomorphized animal characters. These two factors intersect in different ways with the goals of strategic empathizing, as this essay will show through close readings of several panels from each graphic narrative.

**Animal(istic) Agents and Their Audiences**

The technique of representing groups and types by reference to an allegorized animal kingdom of course predates comic books and graphic novels, calling upon a long literary tradition of moralized animal fables, political allegories, and myths of origin in folklore. Italo Calvino demonstrated in *Cosmicomics* (1965, trans. 1968) just how far from the imaginary animal realm a writer must venture to avoid preconceived schemas that ally certain animal types with corresponding human character types: he goes all the way to single-celled organisms and molecules in order to avoid automatic associations such as the kindly herbivore and ferocious meat-eater. When it comes to the evolutionary bases of these associations, there is no need to tell what critics of evolutionary biology and psychology have disparaged (with a nod to Rudyard Kipling) as “just-so stories,” given that they are taught and reinforced by countless representations throughout culture, from babies’ board books to the products of Madison Avenue.

As readers or viewers, we know perfectly well where to place the fox, tiger, and the shark, just as we recognize the traditional vulnerability of their prey. These associations are subject to cultural variation, as readers of *manga* will be well aware. For example, “dog” can be in the “edible” schema with worms, small fish, and mice in some cultures, though Westerners are accustomed to place “dog” just above mouse and cat in the cartoon food chain. Animal stereotypes are also subject to revision by the interventions of scientific narratives, as when hyenas get rehabilitated as hunters rather than scavengers, or, as in Vaughan’s *Pride of Baghdad*, hunting for food on the part of lions is recast as “women’s work.” The traditional schemas relating human types or groups to corresponding animal types may also be revised, resisted, or placed under comic inversion, as in Bruce the shark in *Finding Nemo* (2003), who tries to break his fish-eating habit through a 12-step program, or the pacifist...
bull in Munro Leaf’s *The Story of Ferdinand* (1936), who prefers to sit in the meadow smelling the flowers. Nonetheless, even these resistant uses of anthropomorphized animal figures rely upon widely disseminated and automatically recognized schemas: sharks must be voracious killers and bulls aggressive fighters for the revisionist representations to gain any purchase. When it comes to evoking readers’ sympathy in tales that employ animal figures, then, the representation of particular animals can rarely be a neutral matter. Household pets, farmyard animals, jungle dwellers, birds and sea creatures are already part of a literary tradition that dictates which figures will be sympathetic and which ones will automatically evoke antipathy. Thus any anthropomorphized representation of an animal either tacitly accepts or works against cultural pre-sets. This presents a challenge when representing a predator, unless the species has been honored by prior tradition as a trickster figure. Specialized roles within narrative subgenres can contribute to the alternatives.

The particular representational strategy of anthropomorphizing in *Pride of Baghdad* derives from imperial animal tales. Though *Pride* at least emits faint signals of solidarity with victims of imperial adventures, it participates in the imperial romantic tradition of animal tales dating to the late nineteenth century, as in Kipling’s *The Jungle Books* (1894, 1895). The conventions of this tradition sort animals into sympathetic and unsympathetic categories, in stereotyped and often racist representations kept fresh through children’s books, Disney film adaptations, and even serious literary fiction. Critic Binyavanga Wainaina evokes these stereotypes in a caustic set of mock instructions for representations of Africa. If African humans are flat and predictable (either starving victims, or violent members of warlords’ gangs), Wainaina scathingly observes, animals on the other hand, must be treated as well rounded, complex characters. They speak (or grunt while tossing their manes proudly) and have names, ambitions and desires. They also have family values: see how lions teach their children? Elephants are caring, and are good feminists or dignified patriarchs. So are gorillas. Never, ever say anything negative about an elephant or a gorilla. Elephants may attack people’s property, destroy their crops, and even kill them. Always take the side of the elephant. Big cats have public-school accents. Hyenas are fair game and have vaguely Middle Eastern accents. (Wainaina 94)

In a (post)imperial graphic narrative text such as *Pride of Baghdad*, the dislocations of forced migrancy and updated knowledge about animal behavior do not erase the fundamental imperial adventure conventions. Long-memoried tortoises possess superior wisdom but resist precipitous action. Monkeys are untrustworthy. Lions are still noble even when removed from their natural habitat, even when injured or aged. They keep bargains with zoo animals that they would normally hunt. They work as
a team to prevail against larger predators. Their most dangerous foe, as in Kipling’s Mowgli stories, is man.

Vaughan and Henrichon have a relatively easy task of rendering freed zoo animals as vulnerable (who does not pity the creature bred in captivity when it must make it in the wild?), but they choose to dramatize differences of opinion among their lion characters about natural law and moral imperatives. The environment into which the lions escape is no natural habitat but rather the surreal cityscape of Baghdad under bombardment, a locale that calls into question the lions’ instincts and the usefulness of their knowledge. As zoo lions, the animals represent hybrid subjects, part wild and part domesticated, and this has a bearing on their behavior. Should they eat a human corpse? It is fresh enough to consume, and they are accustomed to feeding on carcasses. They debate the matter and leave the corpse alone, ineffectually stalking horses instead. They are too inexperienced as pack hunters to bring a horse down, informed only by partly recalled details of gazelle behavior. Vaughan and Henrichon differentiate the individual lions: the aging patriarch who gets winded when he runs; the vulnerable cub born into captivity; his mother, an idealist who can scarcely recall life in the wild; and an older blinded female who suffers from Stockholm Syndrome. This last character, who has survived a traumatic gang-rape in the wild, feels indebted to her former keepers for keeping her alive in relative safety. All four make up a family that must stick together if they are to survive their trek across the hostile terrain of the invaded city. Because of the emphasis on the characters’ weaknesses, the generic register owes as much to the picaresque mode of The Incredible Journey (1963), in which lost pets traverse the wilderness to be reunited with their human owners, as to the conventions of animal release narratives such as Born Free (1966) and Free Willy (1993), in which captive animals heroically (instinctively!) adapt to life in the wild. Pride of Baghdad evokes aspects of both narrative subgenres in its vexed meditation on the mortal price of liberty, especially freedom brought by the invasion of terrifying, armored predators.

Stassen’s historical narrative Deogratias mainly concerns human characters, but its nearly realistic style of reportage undergoes a significant change when dramatizing the psychic effects of trauma and guilt on its main character. What might be a straightforward episodic picaresque of a wily survivor undergoes temporal fracturing that juxtaposes traumatic past and haunted present in an anachronous narration. Here, too, man’s lethal agency is represented, in this case by the narrative’s murderers, collaborators, cowardly failed protectors, and avenger. Stassen shows that human nature includes its capacity to violate natural law, but also insists that these actions deform inner human nature. The representational
challenges taken up when Stassen renders a dehumanized boy as a corpse-devouring dog are considerable. For Stassen’s aims to succeed, he must persuade his readers that Deogratias is both a victim and a lethal danger. Stassen strives to avoid simple binary oppositions of black versus white, and Tutsi versus Hutu, but in invoking the trope of beast versus civilized person, he shows that a subject may internalize such oppositions as the self fragments under stress. In addition to working against the convention of dog heroism, in which the dog values human life above its own (Osborne 138), Stassen faces the challenge of representing the consequences of dehumanization in an individual, while relating a history in which deliberate exploitation of racial differences was scripted in a planned genocide. That is, if dehumanization is something that the architects of genocide do to victim classes in order to recruit murderers (call them cockroaches often enough and extermination will seem the inevitable response), Stassen shows that it is also a consequence of participation and survival. When his character turns into a dog, Stassen sets against the conventions of man’s best friend stark imagery of the guilty self as man’s worst enemy. Stassen flirts with clichés of sexual animalism (the Rwandan teenagers are bitches and dogs) even as he evokes humanitarian scripts that feature humans reduced to bestial existences.

That a scavenging dog that eats the flesh of the dead could be a mirror for the true self of a guilty survivor evokes disgust as much as sympathy for the cringing creature. That the lions die at the hands of American soldiers invites pity for the animals and a mixture of anger and understanding for their executioners. The animals called up in both graphic novelists’ political representations are neither innocent herbivores nor the meek and harmless creatures familiar from Western allegories of human society in animal cartoons from early Disney through Spiegelman’s Maus (1986). They resist the simplest schematizing by type, with consequences for narrative empathy. Both the lions and the dog are scavengers and potential killers, so they present at least a temporary barrier to the quick and easy narrative empathy that many readers report feeling for animal characters. Young readers are thought to be especially susceptible to emotional manipulation by narrative. Indeed, critics of anthropomorphizing representation argue that children absorb false and dangerous notions of animal behavior from tales that humanize wild animal nature. This view may sell short children’s ability to distinguish fiction from reality at the age of reading. Presumably mature readers are better able to separate their knowledge of fictive animal characters from the stock of information that supports approach or avoidance behavior in the real world, while enjoying the emotional immediacy of anthropomorphized animal faces. Yet both narratives tell stories based on real events, so it becomes more
difficult to relegate the complex emotions evoked by them as responses to something unreal. Both ask the reader, What if you felt what these doomed victims feel, and could not dismiss their plight as only a story? Would that empathy inspire altruism or personal distress?11

Neither graphic narrative discussed in this paper is aimed at children, though they bear interestingly differentiated labels. *Pride of Baghdad*, a comic book of only moderate difficulty, is labeled above the barcode, “Suggested for Mature Readers.” This is puzzling, since little about it suggests an attempt to appeal to readers beyond the usual teenaged audience. By comic book standards the imagery is neither unusually violent nor graphically sexual. Its claim to historical accuracy may raise the stakes, but historicity is usually a good excuse for unsparing representations of violence and sexuality. In addition to the explosions of the bombardment and a fight with a bear, the references to gang rape and to a female’s desire to repeatedly mate possibly justify the rating—that is, unless the tragic ending itself demands a mature audience. But in many G-rated Disney cartoons for children animal parents and even whole families of creatures die (although rarely at the end of a story). The back-cover rating of *Pride of Baghdad* thus seems more a paratextual cue of seriousness and ambition than a true parental warning label, though anxiety about offending the sensibilities of those who would “support our troops” could be involved. If it were a film, it would be no worse than PG-13.

*Deogratias*, by contrast, could well earn an R rating. It features abusive language (Tutsi girls called “bitches” and “whores”), frank representations of vice (drunkenness and prostitution), and frames showing bloody human murder victims. Far from receiving a warning label, it earned the Gosciny Prize at the Angoulême International Comics Festival in 2000, the award of ALA Best Book for Young Adults, and YALSA Great Graphic Novel, establishing it as appropriate, indeed recommended, reading for teenagers. The marketing of *Deogratias* in English translation aims squarely at the high school classroom. Though its publisher acknowledges that “Because of some language and violence issues in this fictional account of the unthinkable real-life atrocities of the Rwandan genocide, you may be hesitant to assign the entire graphic novel to your high school class” (“Deogratias Lesson Plans”), the text is frankly directed toward high-school aged readers, who are close in age to the narrative’s protagonists.12

Both Stassen and Vaughan and Henrichon may be seen as working against the traditional assumptions about the audience and purposes of graphic narratives, especially for American comic books. This may be seen in their efforts to recast animal representations in new molds. Rather than evoking predictable stereotypes of animals in traditional schemas, both artists push against conventional limits through generic recombination.
and unusual depictions of predators’ vulnerability. They do not reject the
traditional teenaged audience for comic books, but elevate the form by
tackling ambitious topics that might form the basis of classroom discus-
sion of serious contemporary issues. Stassen’s publishers in particular
make a bid for inclusion in the high school social studies or literature
curriculum, where Spiegelman’s Maus is already firmly ensconced. Yet
these texts are by no means avant garde rejections of all popular literature
formulæ. The coming-of-age and dangerous-journey narrative templates
employed by Stassen and Vaughan (respectively) invite character iden-
tification across boundaries of species, racial, and national difference.
The artists’ visual representation of animal faces and postures, featur-
ing big eyes and upward-gazing attitudes of abjection, advantageously
short-circuit readers’ defensive distancing from dangerous predators that
would usually invite antipathy. The emotionally legible expressions on
the characters’ nonhuman faces assert connectedness with readers. This
assumes an engaged response. The happy, surprised, triumphant, fearful,
and miserable lion expressions depicted by Henrichon in Pride of Baghdad,
and the unhappy cringing imagery of abjection in Stassen’s Deogratias
aim to engage empathetic responses on behalf of their subjects and to invest
the characters with a moving subjectivity. This is just the beginning of
the process, however.

The Aims of Compassionate Narration

Stassen’s metonymy makes Deogratias stand in for traumatized
genocide survivors in Rwanda and elsewhere. Vaughan and Henrichon’s
analogizing of the escaped zoo lions points towards innocent noncom-
batants in Iraq and other war zones. Both of these rhetorical strategies
attempt to transfer the sympathy of readers from the suffering fictional
characters to real sufferers who would benefit from altruism in the form
of political or humanitarian intervention. That such an exercise of the
moral imagination also works to the betterment of readers who respond
feelingly is axiomatic in contemporary discourse on empathy, though
difficult to demonstrate empirically.¹³ Stassen’s translator expresses the
thesis of aesthetic moral sentimentalism, in which exposure to others’
suffering improves the responsive reader: “Stassen’s compassionate nar-
ration and his beautifully expressive artwork enable us to imagine the
unimaginable, in a way that few will forget. We come through the fire of
that experience a better person, I feel, because it is only through deep,
heartfelt understanding that we have a chance to overcome—within
ourselves, first—the false divisions that have brought such horrors into
the world” (Siegel n.p.). This prefatory remark sets up a model of reading
in which harrowing feeling acts upon readers to restore a lost sense of
shared humanity, thence to overcome the worst violations of universal human rights. Understanding how narrative empathy works, including its limitations in bringing about altruistic action in the real world, permits examination of the aims of overtly compassionate narratives—including those told through words and images, as in comics.

Narrative empathy embraces three distinct areas of communication through fiction: the authorial empathy of writers in the act of creation; the readers’ empathy on the receiving end; and the textual evidence that bears the traces of strategic empathizing in narrative techniques, formal choices, and the component representations of fictional worlds. I have theorized elsewhere that “ambassadorial empathy is most marked by the relationship between the time of reading and the historical moment of publication, when the text gets sent out in the world to perform its ambassadorial duty by recruiting particular readers to a present cause through emotional fusion. That is, ambassadorial strategic empathy is time sensitive, context and issue dependant” (Keen, “Strategic Empathizing” 486). I identify Deogratias and Pride of Baghdad as texts employing ambassadorial strategic empathy for reasons of timing, context, and contemporary relevance. Though the invasion is a matter of history, the war in Iraq is not over yet. Further, the potential for an attack on Iran raises the spectre of innocent suffering and collateral damage depicted by Vaughan and Henrichon. And the ongoing ethnic violence in the Sudan has kept attention on the Rwandan genocide of the 1990s pertinent to human rights observers. Though we in the west may have pledged never to forget the Holocaust and never again to permit genocide to occur unchecked, we seem to have a particular difficulty in recognizing racist ethnic cleansing when it is perpetrated by Africans against Africans. Stassen addresses directly the failures of whites to respond bravely and appropriately to black African suffering. Hence both graphic narratives send empathetic representations out into the world on errands of humanitarian embassy, and the effort is easy to recognize.

However, there is (as yet) no efficacy test of ambassadorial empathy to verify whether it has worked to increase awareness of a group’s needs or even to solicit altruistic action on their behalf. Narrative empathy may enhance the illusion of immersion in a fictional world by deepening the felt connection of the reader with the imaginary denizens of the narrative, without persuading that reader to take action in the real world. It is not yet known whether these two possibilities, the immersive and the other-directed responses, constitute alternatives that rarely coexist, or complementary effects that enhance narrative impact. We may hypothesize that the deeper the immersion and the stronger the empathetic connection, the greater the chance of prosocial responding. Or, we may predict the
opposite—the deeper the immersion in a fictional world and the stronger the empathy for fictional characters, the weaker the connection to any real-world situation will be. Long-term effects of empathetic narratives on readers’ behavior have proven difficult to study (and to disentangle from confounding influences). An intermediary goal of changing readers’ attitudes toward despised outgroups by representing them sympathetically could, however, be examined empirically. That comics and graphic narratives have not, as yet, featured in empirical research on narrative empathy and changed attitudes suggests not that they have no impact, but that they still lack the necessary prestige.

We should be struck by how rarely cultural arbiters make any version of the empathy-altruism claim about graphic narratives. While novel-reading frequently garners praise as an empathy-inducing and altruism-producing pastime, comic-book consumption has not often been credited with cultivating sympathetic imagination and developing good world citizens. After the watershed publication of *Maus* in book form, the situation changed. Graphic narratives began to be seen as potential influences on public awareness, civic engagement, and tolerance, without suffering any significant loss of their reputation for edgy subversion. We may now inquire whether graphic narrative’s capacity to render characters especially attractive or pitiable might channel readers’ responses to visual cues in a compassionate direction. Both texts under examination here use effective techniques for hooking onto readers’ shared manifold for intersubjectivity, and they do so in a popular form designed for maximum accessibility. Popularity becomes an asset rather than a dubious trait. The potential to reach and move the feelings of large numbers of readers makes graphic narrative especially attractive to authors of compassionate, exemplary, and didactic tales. For instance, Rotary International recently disseminated one nonfiction comic book on their effort to eradicate polio worldwide (Schoberg and Buccatello, “Polio”) and another relating the life of Rotary founder Paul Harris (Schoberg and Buccatello, “Harris”). Imitating the use of the format to disseminate the findings of the 9/11 Commission report, *The Rotarian* explains, “Graphic nonfiction has received widespread acceptance as a way to tell a serious story in a comic-book format.”

To some degree the potential outcomes of comic-book reading refer back to generic contracts texts make with readers. The salient narrative genres in the two texts discussed here are romance, picaresque adventure, tragedy, and reportage. Both are dignified but not limited by a relationship to historical facts. The representation of the dehumanized boy (by Stassen) and anthropomorphized group of lions (by Vaughan and Henrichon) certainly serves old-fashioned goals of romance narratives: namely, to
tell the truths of the human heart and to reveal the suffering of those caught up in actions they do not control. The texts’ episodic narrative structures, their emphasis on the risk of starvation, rape, and murder, and the protagonists’ position outside the law relate to picaresque tales of sympathetic rogues and thieves. *Deogratias* evokes *Romeo and Juliet* with its plot of star-crossed lovers, one Hutu and one Tutsi, in the days leading up to the Rwanda genocide. Since both narratives are tragic, their aims can be accounted for by the ancient rhetorical theory of Aristotle, as *Pride of Baghdad* evokes sorrow and pity for the slain lions and *Deogratias* elicits horror and pity for the boy turned avenger, who is captured by the authorities as the narrative ends. As adaptations of reportage, the texts invest imaginatively in eyewitness, ground-level, personal accounts of events. Readers of *Pride of Baghdad* see the invasion of Iraq through the eyes of the disoriented and homeless zoo lions. The writer and illustrator rely on civilian and combatant bloggers and interviews with eyewitnesses to build their story in reportage style. *Deogratias* employs multiple shifting perspectives to chart the deliberate division of the Rwandan people into separate ethnic categories in the days leading up to genocide. Stassen reveals the cowardice and culpability of white western observers, including clerics, tourists, and soldiers who were present when the Rwandan massacres began, in a series of flashbacks that eventually explain why the title character has been driven into madness and a contemporary revenger’s tragedy. Though both texts are arguably cathartic, they do not make any explicit demands on the subsequent prosocial behavior of readers moved by their subjects’ plight. That is, their genres make bids for literary seriousness rather than for didactic exemplarity.

The writers’ and artists’ recourse to representational strategies that provide a fast track to narrative empathy does not require resolution in an obvious moral or a directive to action. Their conclusions omit suggestions about “What YOU can do to help”—in striking contrast to didactic comic books. In *Pride of Baghdad* the group of lions stands in for civilian populations just trying to survive during bombardment, invasion, and occupation. The penultimate words of the comic book are presented on a two-page panoramic view of Baghdad in flames: “In April of 2003, four lions escaped the Baghdad Zoo during the bombing of Iraq. The starving animals were eventually shot and killed by U. S. soldiers.” The final pages present a more peaceful version of the night scene over the city, with the understated conclusion, “There were other casualties as well.” The lions are not the only ones who have been liberated by death. In *Deogratias*, exploited children, especially adolescent boys vulnerable to recruitment as child soldiers and junior *génocidaires*, are the true subjects of compassionate attention, but the title character seems doomed in the work’s final pages.
A reader resonating with empathetic feeling with a slain lion, or with a boy so traumatized that he has turned into a kicked cur, may not make a voluntary leap to the group targeted for compassion. The restraint from open didacticism underscores these texts’ literary ambition: “suggested for mature readers.”

Few readers would contest that the texts are moving. The illustrations participate in the texts’ humanitarian endeavor by calling upon readers’ innate capacity to recognize and internally rehearse the feelings of others from facial cues. What role does the drawing play in evoking readers’ feelings? To what degree do the visual representations of faces support compassionate narrative aims, as propagated through the texts’ verbal channels? Does the visual element strengthen the texts’ appeal to readers, or does it undermine connections with the real world when it departs from realistic conventions? Does the fast track to readers’ empathy provided by the graphic rendering of facial expressions and bodily postures contribute to effective ambassadorial narrative empathizing, helping to override the schemas of antipathy that come along with animal stereotypes or with bias against human wrongdoers? Does narrative empathy for impossible creatures (talking lions) or abject, irredeemable victims (the banana-beer-addicted boy) work at cross-purposes to the evident aims of these compassionate documentary texts?

Emotional Facial Expressions and Revealing Postures

In graphic narratives, verbal description of emotional states can be replaced by drawings of bodily postures and facial expressions that readily communicate feelings to readers. According to Paul Ekman’s extension of Charles Darwin’s The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals (1872), core universal emotions (anger, sadness, fear, surprise, disgust, contempt, and happiness) are observable from fleeting facial expressions. The art of the comic book can freeze these expressions in close-up frames that arrest time and enhance recognition of the subject’s feelings (McCloud 130). These expressions and postures are easily and rapidly interpreted unless the reader has a deficit in mind-reading ability (as for instance from autism, Asperger’s Syndrome, or amygdala damage caused by injury or disease). Ekman’s cross-cultural fieldwork on facial expressions of emotions supports Darwin’s contention that humans and animals share basic emotions shown in bodily postures and facial expressions, though symbolic representation of aspects of basic emotion may be added to that repertoire in different cultures (McCloud 131). These may be reduced to diagrammatic representations of simplified human faces exhibiting sad, happy, angry, surprised, disgusted, or fearful expressions (similar to images used to train children with autism spectrum disorders in affect
recognition). Though I will not argue here that either of the graphic narratives I am considering attempts naturalistic or verisimilar representation (both are stylized in different ways), I suggest that the postures and faces are drawn in a way that calls upon readers’ shared manifold for intersubjectivity (Gallese 35) and fictional mind-reading ability.

Stassen represents his subject’s psychological dissociation by transformation from human to animal, and Vaughan translates the Baghdad Zoo lions’ fate into a tragic idiom, through anthropomorphic imagery, gender stereotyping, and adoption of “band of brothers” war film conventions. Neither work aspires to accurate representation of animal behavior, though both are bound by obligations to historical frames—respectively, the ethnic violence of the 1994-95 genocide in Rwanda, and the April 2003 killing of four escaped Baghdad Zoo lions by American soldiers (“US Troops kill Baghdad lions”). In both works, animal characteristics act as proxies for traits of human difference or otherness that ambassadorial
empathy must overcome in readers conditioned by similarity bias, or by
the tendency to favor and sympathize with members of one’s own group. How does anthropomorphizing intersect with prosocial representational
goals? Such anthropomorphizing may encourage unjust judgments, for
the habitual representation of demonized species (such as insects) as exterminable can encourage a disregard for certain categories of living
beings. Moreover, it is not immediately obvious that anthropomorphizing
by itself encourages readers to empathize with human-like animals. Yet
when an animal is drawn as if it had a human face, it may make an easier
target for empathy than alien and potentially dangerous human beings.
When a human being is revealed as bestial, the risk of empathy yielding
to personal distress may be enhanced.

As suggested by figures 1 and 2, artist Niko Henrichon adeptly
transposes human expressions onto his lion characters’ faces. The first
four full-page spreads at the beginning of the narrative feature frontal
portraits of the four main characters while they are still in the zoo, drawn
with details to distinguish them by age and gender. As the US warplanes
roar overhead, they react with different emotional expressions. Zill, the
senior male, shows concern and concern: the human keepers are up
to something, but the noise makes him cower, covering his ears. The cub
Ali is thrilled by the spectacle. His mother Noor, the younger lioness,
shows the greatest emotional range in these early panels, rapidly shifting
through optimism, frustration, and dejection (indicated through her
facial expressions and bodily postures), as she attempts to orchestrate a
prison break. The eldest lion is Safa, a partially blinded character whose
traumatic backstory is related through an involuntary flashback while
she squeezes her eyes shut, brow furrowed and mouth clamped tight.
To demonstrate why she might be reluctant to leave the zoo, the artists
present her recalling her gang rape and mutilation by a thuggish gang of
lions in the wild. Their wrinkled noses and sneers indicate their contempt
for their victim. Though male lions compete to copulate with females in
heat (and a lion pair may repeatedly mate), it is certainly not unusual for a
lioness to have multiple sex partners (Schaller 142). The rape scene recasts
lion behavior in terms of a human construct, violence against women.

From the very outset of the narrative, then, Vaughan and Henrichon’s
lions are given anthropomorphized personalities, experiences, and
expressions. Real lions do not smile or frown, nor do they have eyebrows.
Henrichon’s lions express happiness, relief, concern, wariness, fear, sadness,
terror, and disgust through combinations of head tilt, mouth position
(open in figure 1 to express a happy smile; clamped tight in figure 2 to
show fear), and variations on brow furrowing/eyebrow position. These
techniques underwrite the distinct responses of the lions to threats and
challenges as they make their way across Baghdad, teeming up to defeat a grizzly bear and ascending the rubble to the top of a building where the younger members of the pride see the horizon for the first time in their lives.

*Pride of Baghdad* depends upon the solidity of the anthropomorphizing as it details the lions’ responses. Safa’s self-sacrificial courage, Ali’s resourceful enthusiasm, Zill’s wisdom, and Noor’s assumption of leadership and responsibility all track along folk-psychological models for human teambuilding. This places the reader squarely in the lions’ camp as the first live human beings, American soldiers, enter the graphic narrative at its tragic conclusion. They are announced by the bullet that hits Zill, the hail of automatic weapon fire that takes out Safa, and the subsequent shots that kill Ali and Noor. Henrichon focuses attention on the dying Noor’s face, framed in a spreading puddle of blood, as she utters her last words and human speech takes over. Though the soldiers immediately exonerate one another of responsibility for the killing (“You didn’t have a choice.”), Henrichon represents them without ever showing their faces, and Noor’s shouted condemnation, “ANIMALS!” confirms the text’s assessment of which species is the most deserving of empathy in the narrative. It would be a highly unusual reader who could truly engage in perspective-taking with the point of view of the lions’ executioners. Thus Vaughan and Henrichon succeed in distancing readers from their natural alliance with fellow humans by anthropomorphizing the lions. Yet the closing lines of the text, quoted above, allude to the “other casualties” that occurred during the invasion of Baghdad. Though the numbers are disputed, civilians did die. If the ultimate aim of the ambassadorial strategic empathy evoked on behalf of the escaped zoo lions is to transfer readers’ concern to vulnerable civilians, endangered both by their own countrymen and by the invasion forces, then the text falters. The metaphor would allegorize the Iraqi population as zoo animals confined by a murderous keeper (Saddam), unsure of what to do with their freedom, and at risk from the other “animals” out in the wilds of the Middle East—perhaps even “better off dead.” The narrative of sympathy for the doomed animals, though highly successful in evoking empathy for Ali, Noor, Safa, and Zill, strains to accommodate a broader population. This reminds us that empathy for individual sufferers does not necessarily translate into justice for peoples and nations. *Pride of Baghdad* thus demonstrates both the capacity and the limitations of ambassadorial strategic empathy invoked through simple animal/human transpositions by way of anthropomorphizing representations.

Stassen’s *Deogratias* avoids the trap of simplified characterization, in part because the illustrations set out to avoid reinscribing Hutu/Tutsi
ethnic differences as visually legible. Though it is easy to tell the white characters from the black ones, Stassen challenges easy categorization by making his Rwandan teenagers look like a variety of young people rather than stylized representatives of distinct ethnic groups. Only the mixed race Apollinaria is depicted with coffee skin tone rather than the uniformly dark brown skin of the others: in her little group we come to realize that Deogratias is Hutu, while her sister Benina is Tutsi. In one scene, a teacher instructing his students on the difference between the majority Hutus and minority Tutsis has to ask his class to identify themselves by raising their hands (Stassen 18). The alleged ethnic difference does not show. The friendly white priest Brother Philip innocently remarks, “It’s so strange: I’ve known you for quite a while, but I still don’t even know what ethnic group you belong to. … are you Hutu or Tutsi?” Deogratias laughs, “No one but whites asks questions like that!” (36). Stassen emphasizes instead a more striking difference: Deogratias before the massacres and the addicted, tormented Deogratias who has survived, but at the cost of complicity in his friends’ murders. Stassen marks the difference between the earlier Deogratias and the later one by the condition of his white t-shirt. In the flashback scenes to the past it is clean and intact, while it appears filthy and covered with holes in scenes set in the present.

Stassen focuses the reader’s attention on the condition of Deogratias’ white outfit, an outward sign revealing his inner condition, but also a clear visual cue as to time-frame in this complex narrative. The transformation of boy into dog fuses the tattered shirt, which has already accrued meanings of poverty, self-neglect, and abjection, with the very body of Deogratias. His face elongates, his eyes are reddened, and his mouth pokes out into a snout. The boy turns into a dog. If Deogratias’s past self is a more innocent one, not yet contaminated by the guilt of genocidal violence, the pelt of the present self reveals his bestial nature, his fear, and his dissociation.

Why does Deogratias become a dog? The moment of transmogrification is marked by the murder of Benina and Apollinaria. The artist does not render their deaths directly, though he shows their raped and mutilated mother’s corpse. When a soldier shoots two dogs that are tearing at the bodies of the heaped-up genocide victims, Deogratias puts himself in their place. At that instant, his complicity established, Deogratias identifies


SubStance #124, Vol. 40, no. 1, 2011
LA NUIT... C'EST LE JOUR...

LE SOLEIL NE ME VEILLE PAS. IL N'Y A PAS DE CHIENS... MAIS LES ÉTOILES SE REFONDENT... COMME DES CLOUS SUR LES CRÊNÉS... IL N'Y A PAS DE VENTRES...

... J'AI MÊME PEUR DU JOUR... LES ÉTOILES, ELLES SONT LÀ... JE VOIS DES ÉTOILES EN PLEIN JOUR...
himself with the scavenging animals. No longer fully human, Deogratias is self-condemned to survive as a dog. Being an animal also exonerates Deogratias of any subsequent moral responsibility, even as it codes his dehumanization as a consequence of his own guilty participation in the genocide. His cringing, fearful posture causes others to pity him, but also to underestimate him. When it turns out he has been systematically avenging the deaths of his friends by murdering those involved, including bystanders who might have intervened on their behalf, the dog posture and behavior seems more a disguise than a revelation of true colors. The last words of the narrative, spoken by Brother Philip, who has heard Deogratias’s confession and witnessed his arrest for poisoning, read: “He was a creature of God” (Stassen 78). Yet Deogratias has retreated within his disguise: the arresting officers have carried off a cringing cur, with no resemblance to a man. The complex movements of this graphic narrative, oscillating between sympathy and horror, complicate Stassen’s use of ambassadorial strategic empathy. Inhibited from feeling full empathy for the avenger, readers are still invited to imagine him as possessing a human soul. The impossibility of sharing Deogratias’s experience without following him into madness announces a different limit of narrative empathy, not the difficulty of converting empathy into altruistic action, but the terrifying possibility that feeling what Deogratias feels obliges us to avenge him. The fast track to empathy initiated by the affecting illustrations causes discomfort that yields to personal distress.

Directions for Further Research

It remains an open question, however, whether an individual reader or targeted groups of readers actually respond empathetically—with aversive personal distress, anger, or altruism—to visual representations of dehumanized people and anthropomorphized animals in comics and graphic narratives. One way to investigate how issues of medium specificity affect narrative empathy would thus be to engage in empirical research on how readers respond to graphic sequences. In a laboratory setting, individual frames from comics or graphic narratives could be presented with and without their verbal channel (creating such images would be a relatively easy editing task using Photoshop). One would not need fMRI brain scans to record subjects’ responses: skin conductance data measuring palm sweat or monitoring of subjects’ heart rates could be combined with responses to questionnaires such as David S. Miall and Don Kuiken’s Literary Response Questionnaire (LRQ). Baseline dispositional empathy of subjects could be ascertained by administering the standard instrument for assessing subjects’ empathy, Mark Davis’s Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI), with special attention to the fantasy empathy scale. Until
such experiments are carried out, with the cooperation of developmental psychologists expert in the relation of emotional responsiveness to moral development, literary scholars should make an effort to document as well as theorize the impact of emotionally evocative representations in graphic narratives and comics. A literary history of emotional responses and their outcomes will be most persuasive if it includes the full range of narrative forms, including the popular, the hybrid, and the visual.

Washington and Lee University

Notes

1. See Sprengelmeyer et al. and Morris et al.
2. See Ekman.
3. See Vogl.
4. See Joseph LeDoux, whose phrase describes the first fast subcortical responses to anger that occur in the thalamus and amygdala before they are supplemented by neocortical cognitive processing (163-4).
5. Though a literate reader cannot help taking in words and their meanings (as response times to the Stroop test demonstrate), visual references to facial expressions may be processed even faster than the textual element. On the Stroop effect, see Taylor and Olson.
6. I have observed in earlier work on narrative empathy that readers often recall intensely empathetic childhood reading experiences featuring animal characters (Keen, *Empathy and the Novel* 68-9). These recollections often feature animals depicted as victims of human abuse or environmental hazards: Bambi and Black Beauty would be standard examples for readers now middle-aged. Though this evidence suggested to me that readers' empathy can readily be evoked for a nonhuman character, I did not pursue questions about the cultural scripts (and literary histories) that render a deer or a horse sympathetic and a tiger or a cobra antipathetic. For more on this subject, see Oswald.
7. On the separate evolved human neural systems for recognition of fear, disgust, and anger, see e.g. Sprengelmeyer et al. and Morris et al.
8. These cultural pre-sets can shift over time. See Arnold.
9. To be sure, Spiegelman's dogs and cats are far from harmless, and even pigs cannot be relied upon to rescue the persecuted mice.
10. Famously, Maria Montessori excluded anthropomorphizing animal tales from her classrooms. On the risks of anthropomorphizing, see Benson.
11. Personal distress is an aversive response to empathic emotional fusion: it is self-protective rather than other-oriented.
12. DC Comics has a core audience of younger readers while First Second cultivates teachers and parents shopping for young adult readers. The original French and Belgian context for Stassen's work also supports the inference that it was targeted at an older and more sophisticated readership.
13. See, for instance, philosopher Martha Nussbaum's statements on the subjected, dispersed throughout her work (e.g., *Love's Knowledge* 97, *Poetic Justice*, and *Cultivating Humanity* in passim). Nussbaum advances a version of psychology's empathy-altruism hypothesis (on which see Batson), applied to experiences of narrative empathy experienced by readers of fiction. Cf. Keen, *Empathy and the Novel* (16-26).
15. On the basic emotions, see Ekman, “An Argument for Basic Emotions.” See also his response to critics and overview of his position in “Basic Emotions.”
16. In this context mind-reading refers not to telepathy but to the ability to infer others’ feelings and likely attitudes from facial expressions, gestures, and bodily postures. On the mind-blindness of Asperger’s sufferers, see Lisa Capps et al. and Attwood 11, 15-17.
17. See Ekman, *Darwin and Facial Expression* and *Emotions Revealed*.
18. See for example the simple line drawings in Vogl.
19. Space does not permit full discussion here of recent work in the cognitive narratology of other minds. For starting points, see Butte, Palmer, and Zunshine.

**Works Cited**


