

## Graphic Journalism

Telling true stories through the juxtaposition of image and text

Rezan was a fashion designer in Syria until he fled the Islamic State and ended up in a refugee camp on the Greek island of Kos. "We are a group of sixteen people from Kobani," he told Olivier Kugler, a reporter covering the refugee crisis there.

In Kugler's story, we learn that Rezan's home had been ransacked, the school where he'd taught painting had been destroyed and the orchard where he'd played as a child had been razed. We learn this, and more, not in paragraphs laid out in columns, to be read sentence after sentence after sentence, but instead through drawings interwoven with handwritten text. Rezan sits in the middle, his young, weary niece on his lap. Chunks of his words are enclosed in quotation marks. Our eyes circle the frame, taking in everything.

This was Kugler's way of exposing the plight of Syrian refugees. This is graphic journalism.

Graphic journalism is an increasingly visible medium that uses a combination of illustration and text to tell a timely, reported, nonfiction story. It is also called illustrated journalism, visual reportage, comics journalism, nonfiction cartooning and other variations that reflect its defining trait: without the artwork, the story is incomplete.

The medium is not to be confused with other genres that blend illustration and text. Although short- and long-form political cartoons may resemble some graphic journalism, they are intended as satire. Graphic novels are, by definition, fiction. Furthermore, graphic journalism must be distinguished from commonly found prose journalism with accompanying illustrations, where the artwork enhances the written story but is not integral to it. In graphic journalism, the words and images are codependent; an investigated story is communicated through their precise juxtaposition.

Visual reportage became popular in the second half of the nineteenth century, as readers turned to publications like *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper* and *Harper's Weekly* for illustrated coverage of the Civil War, and illustrators were sent to courtrooms to record legal proceedings. Contemporary graphic journalism took shape in the wake of the Pulitzer Prize-winning *Maus*, Art Spiegelman's graphic Holocaust memoir, serialized between 1980 and 1991. A few years later, the Maltese American cartoonist and journalist Joe Sacco documented his two-month stay in the West Bank and Gaza Strip in a nine-issue, nonfiction comic book series titled *Palestine*. After that, the genre blossomed.

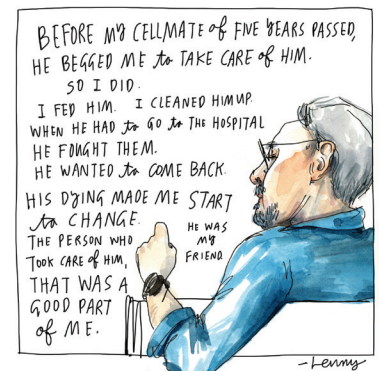
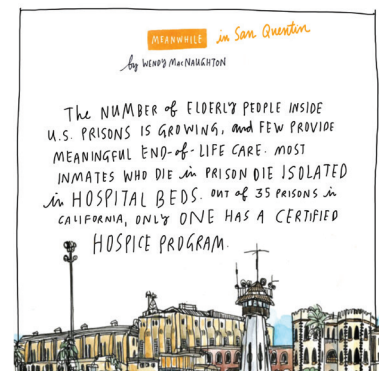


This drawing of Rezan and his niece Rocca was created as part of a larger series portraying Syrian refugees whom reportage illustrator Olivier Kugler met on the Greek island of Kos in August 2015, during the height of the refugee crisis. The work was commissioned by Médecins Sans Frontières (Doctors Without Borders) in order to help raise awareness of the refugees' circumstances. The drawings were first published in *Harper's Magazine* and then in Kugler's 2018 book, *Escaping Wars and Waves*, copublished by Pennsylvania State University Press and Myriad Editions.

Fast forward to late 2018, when readers of a redesigned *New York Times* Sunday Business section discovered a surprising addition: Wendy MacNaughton's quirky graphic journalism column, *Meanwhile*. In her introductory installment, the San Francisco, California-based MacNaughton promised to "explore the rich story behind an everyday object, familiar place or uncelebrated face ..."

*Meanwhile* appeared in the *Times* in print and online for ten months, its topics ranging from dark-sky tourism to the growing market for air-filtering face masks to a housing facility for LGBTQ seniors. Each of those journalistic portraits joined a larger collection of *Meanwhile* stories that began in 2010 as an online series in the *Rumpus* and ran for three years in the *California Sunday Magazine*. Since leaving the *Times*, MacNaughton, 44, has continued her project, often working out of a mobile studio she outfitted in the back of her Honda Element.

MacNaughton is adamant about drawing on-site, interacting with people as she does, recording parts of conversations in her sketchbook alongside her pen-and-ink sketches. In her studio, she



The second installment of Wendy MacNaughton's *Meanwhile* column in the *New York Times* Sunday Business section (left) was created in response to the air pollution resulting from fires burning in Northern California, and the depressing business opportunities accompanying climate change-related emergencies. Nick Summers, editor. From "Meanwhile in San Quentin," about hospice care in California prisons (right), which appeared in the *California Sunday Magazine*. "My background as a social worker and as a former artist-in-residence at a hospice facility helped prepare me for this, but drawing in prison presents its own unique challenges," says MacNaughton. "No photography is allowed, so drawing is the only way to document what's going on inside. Shortly after this was published, California Supreme Court justice Goodwin Liu gave the commencement address at Yale Law School and quoted this story in his call for future lawyers and judges to reform the criminal justice system." Leo Jung, creative director; Douglas McGray/Raha Naddaf, editors.

paints her drawings with watercolors and hand letters the text. "I am totally analog," she says. "I tried to make a font of my handwriting, but it didn't feel human."

A human feel is essential for MacNaughton. "The hand-drawn image hooks our eyes and slows us down," she says. "We recognize it as being made by another human, and we connect in a way that I don't think we do with any other medium."

Last October, the *Times* Sunday Business section launched a new graphic journalism column called *Scratch*, a full-page collaboration illustrated by Julia Rothman and written by Shaina Feinberg. For Nick Summers, editor of the section, the form offers fresh possibilities. "Something about the fact that it is illustrated means we are open to a totally new range of characters and experiences and stories and claims and voices," he says. "We can publish these stories simply because they are poignant."

The unique poignancy conjured through graphic journalism is one quality that makes the medium an apt choice for telling particular stories. Others include its ability to protect sources who prefer to be anonymous and to capture images when cameras are prohibited or intrusive. It may also be used to show scenes that are too violent or otherwise disturbing to reveal photographically.

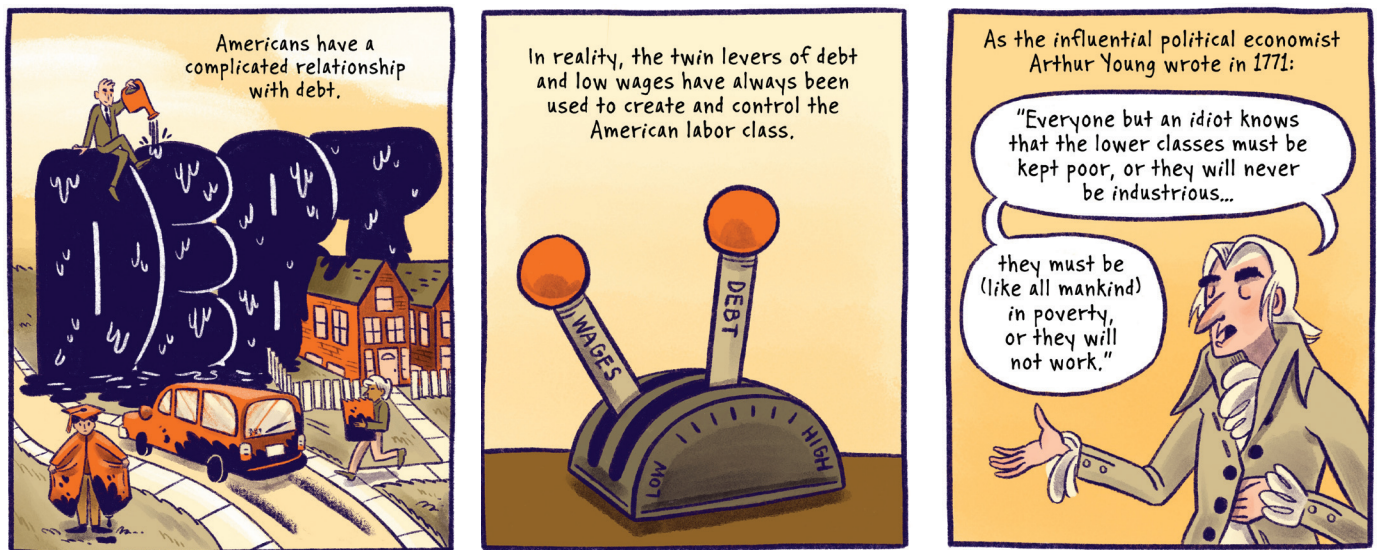
Graphic journalism works well to parse complex concepts. Last year, Joyce Rice illustrated a lively explanatory piece on the far-reaching implications of personal debt. "Debt is so abstract," she says. "You can't take a picture of it."

Rice is a 32-year-old cartoonist living in Ocala, Florida. Back in 2012, she and Erin Polgreen cofounded *Symbolia*, an online publication that commissioned graphic journalism until it disbanded in 2015. Rice is also a contributor to the *Nib*, a still-active online and print publication for political cartoons and graphic journalism, established by Matt Bors in 2013. Rice's debt story, written by Kevin Moore, appeared there.

Rice, who draws on an iPad Pro with an Apple Pencil, represented debt as a sticky purple goo oozing through her piece. "When you want to explain a system in a news article, you might use a graph or a map," Rice says. "With illustrated journalism, all that can be visualized."

The emotional impact of graphic journalism was in full force at an exhibition of Kugler's refugee drawings at the 2014 Fumetto International Comix Festival, in Switzerland. Kugler, who lives in London, had traveled to Iraqi Kurdistan the previous year to interview and photograph occupants of Syrian migrant camps. He





From “Americans Are Drowning in Debt,” illustrated by Joyce Rice and written by Kevin Moore and published by the Nib. “Debt is often written about through a lens of shame or moral failing, when it’s actually part of a robust and long-standing system that locks people into their economic bracket,” says Rice. “Given that 70 percent of Americans are living paycheck to paycheck, we knew this one would resonate, and we knew a comic would be a good access point for people new to this topic.”

would continue this undertaking in Kos and parts of France, England and Germany. Some of the work was commissioned by Médecins Sans Frontières; selections were published in *Harper’s Magazine*. In 2017, the drawings were compiled into a German-language book, and in 2018, the 80-page *Escaping Wars and Waves: Encounters With Syrian Refugees* was published.

Like Rezan, most of Kugler’s subjects are portrayed in a single layered illustration: lines next to lines suggesting movement; colored, handwritten paragraphs; drawings echoed throughout the page like ghostly memories. At the Fumetto exhibition, Kugler, now 50, was approached by a couple who had lingered before each piece. “They said they’d seen so much footage of refugees—on tv, online, in newspapers and magazines—that they’d become oversaturated,” he recalls. “It didn’t touch them anymore. But, they said, something about my drawings made the people speak to them directly. It made them reengage with [the refugees’] suffering.”

Kugler comments on the matter of objectivity in graphic journalism. “It’s extremely important that I produce honest work,” he says. “As a journalist, yes, you pick the parts you want to use to make the story as strong as you can. But all the texts are based on interviews I conducted, and all the drawings are based on photos I took of the people in their environment. I don’t make anything up.”

For editors of the medium, maintaining journalistic principles goes without saying. “This thing has to obey the very strictest standards of the *New York Times*,” Summers says of the Sunday Business column Scratch. “The facts have to be 100 percent accurate. We have to quote exactly what people say.”

Bors says all pieces in the *Nib* are fact-checked. For *Symbolia*, Rice and Polgreen fact-checked not only copy but also visuals.

It was graphic journalism’s power to evoke identification that led Josh Neufeld, a comics journalist in Brooklyn, New York, to share his experiences during Hurricane Katrina through nonfiction cartooning. Neufeld, 52, cites Scott McCloud’s *Understanding Comics*, a 1993

comic book about comics in which the author theorized that simplified comics characters prompt bonding in readers. “It elicits empathy,” Neufeld says of the form, “especially when the stories are of people whose voices aren’t usually heard.”

Neufeld’s *A.D.: New Orleans After the Deluge* follows seven New Orleans residents before, during and after the storm. With panels as the compositional basis, the work, which was serialized as a webcomic in 2007 and 2008 and debuted as a book in 2009, exploits the expressive powers of color. Neufeld chose a muted palette for his true stories “as a contrast to the technicolor palette of superhero comics,” he says.

In the book, each section adheres to a color scheme. Yellow and green signify the ominous sky as the hurricane approaches. When the storm hits, the palette switches to shades of aqua. The flooding is conveyed with an impenetrable black. The humid postflood days feature what Neufeld describes as “a sickly greenish-yellow fighting an angry red.”

Reinvigorating a story in the face of widespread media fatigue was one reason the *New York Times Magazine* asked Christoph Niemann for his take on Brexit. *The Breakup*, published last October, presented a contextual overview of Brexit through a whimsical mix of drawings, photographs and text assembled into sequential panels both online and in print. “The attempt wasn’t to tell a new story or to say something that nobody has said before,” Niemann, 49, says. “It was to say it differently. To make it interesting again.”

In the piece, a lanky avatar of the Berlin-based artist and author traipses through London, trotting across the Westminster Bridge, visiting the House of Commons, popping into the National Gallery. Niemann’s writing was set in a font of his handwriting, which resembles the bold strokes in his illustrations. This connection is a visual embodiment of the foundational tenet of any graphic journalism story: the absolute interdependency of image and text. “You cannot separate them,” Niemann says. “You have to have both. There is no hierarchy.” [ca](#)