

# Story-telling in Graphic Novels

A Study of Autobiographical Graphic Novels

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Visual Communication Project

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A Study of Autobiographical Graphic Novels

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The Visual Communication Special Project entitled:

## Story-telling in Graphic Novels

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Guide:

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# Introduction

'Graphic Novel' is a term generally applied to refer to comic books which are aimed at a mature audience and are centred around mature and complex themes. Graphic novels are supposed to have better artwork and printing and binding. They can be published as original single volume novels or compilation of perviously published multiple volume serialized stories. A collection of short stories (in comics) is also referred as a graphic novel.

Although a widely used term now, 'Graphic Novel' is more of a publisher's and marketing term. As comics are generally associated with juvenile themes and adolescent readers, the term graphic novel indicates a departure from monthly disposable magazine to a permanent bookshelf collection. However many of the foremost authors like Alan Moore says that they are fine with the term 'Comics' and do not intended to be called as Graphic Novelists. Acclaimed comics theorist Scott McCloud also remarks that a square binding and slick printing do not guarantee a creditable work of literature and that comics as an art form and a communication medium do not need the term graphic novel to prove its worthwhile.

With all the controversy regarding the term, graphic novels have come to be recognized as an important form of storytelling and literature. Artists like Art Spiegelman, Alan Moore, Will Eisner, Frank Miller and others have contributed to the growth of this relatively younger form of art.

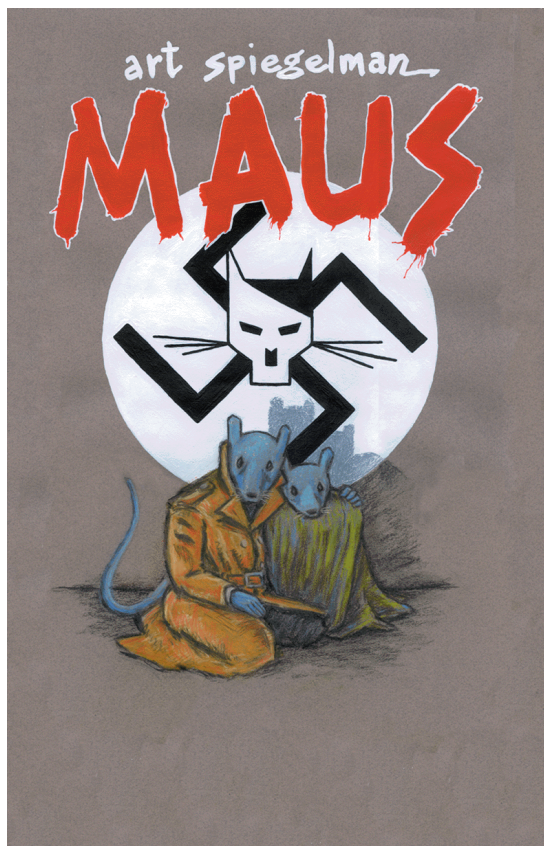
Another sub-genre which has come to be important is that of autobiographies and autobiographical accounts in comic book medium. They are highly personal and self-motivated works by artists of their life and experiences. Through their work artists over the years have shared their personal trauma, struggle and often complex issues regarding society and culture in their times. Through their personal approach towards drawing and story-telling, artists have explored the medium of comics to tell stories which go beyond mere words and picture.

For the Project I have selected four authors whose works have been appreciated and considered as defining by their peers. I have tried to study the works as a unique approach through graphic story-telling and layers of meanings in words and pictures towards self-expression. The works studied are as follows,

Maus: A Survivor's Tale by Art Spiegelman,  
Epileptic by David B.,  
Palestine by Joe Sacco,

# Maus: A Survivor's Tale

Art Spiegelman



Perhaps the most important of all graphic works published, 'Maus: A Survivor's Tale' is the story of Art Spiegelman's father's struggle to survive Holocaust being a Jew in Poland. It is also the story of Spiegelman's complex relationship with his father and effects of war reverberating through generations in a family.

Written over a period of 13 years (1978-1991), Maus is largely based upon Art Spiegelman's father Vladek's recollection of Holocaust. During this time Spiegelman visited Poland a number of times to collect references. Published in two volumes, 'Maus' won a Pulitzer Prize Special Award in 1992. It has come to be an important work of fiction because of its unique approach towards telling personal experiences and relationships through and honest portrayal of a Jewish migrant family in US. It was also an important breakthrough for the medium of comic books which was mostly considered appropriate for teenagers. Art Spiegelman gave a whole new definition to this perception when his work proved that a medium is not genre or age specific and it is an author's creativity and commitment to define a medium for himself/herself.

Maus uses layered meanings and metaphors in imagery and words to create a complex tale about people surviving through war and relationships. It has over the years inspired a lot of artists to explore the medium of comic books and most importantly their own life.

## Overview

Maus tells two stories of survival. One that of Vladek Spiegelman's struggle in Poland during Second World War, and another of Vladek's son Art's struggle with his behaviour and overpowering presence. The books keeps alternating between 1940's Poland and 1970's New York.

Vladek Spiegelman was a very resourceful man in his youth. His contacts and ability to do a lot of tasks was the prime reason behind his survival during Holocaust. He was married to Anya, Art's mother who later committed suicide in 1968. Vladek and Anya had a son, Rechiu who along with a lot of their relatives did not make it through Holocaust. Art grew up listening to survival stories of his father which led him to embark upon this project. After Anya death Vladek married Mala, another Holocaust survivor. Art Spiegelman honestly describes his father as a stingy old man who in his pride and stubborn way of doing things making life difficult for those around him. Although a victim of racial discrimination, Vladek is prejudiced against African-Americans. Vladek's behaviour and death of Art's mother made life difficult for him. And in the shadow of his father's struggle 'Maus' is a story of Art speigelman surviving those who survived the Holocaust.

Although Holocaust is the central theme of the Novel, Art Spiegelman has also depicted the lives of migrant jews and issues related to their lives in America. He talks of apprehensions and remorse he feels for people who suffered a trauma and his own life which is minnowed because his did not face it.





## Metaphors and Meanings



What makes 'Maus' a true masterpiece is the way in which subtle metaphors are being established. In a unique way of adding a layer to the Vladek's story, people belonging to different nationalities have been represented by different animals. Where in Jews irrespective of their nationalities have been represented as mice. Various representations are;

Jews as mice,  
 Germans as cats,  
 Americans as dogs,  
 Poles as pigs,  
 French as frogs,  
 Swedes as deer.

In a playful manner child of a German and a Jew has been shown as mouse with cat stripes.

Speigelman's representation intensifies emotion of individuals as a collective feelings using the stereotypical tussle between a cat and a mouse. On the other hand the metaphors are not meant to stereotype people but to create a paradox which says how senseless it is to stereotype. Mouse and cat are not his representation for the people but rather borrowed from the Germans who discriminated Jews on the basis of racial stereotype, as Germans considered Jews as rats (filthy creatures).

It can be seen as Speigelman's intention for the metaphors to self-destruct. On one hand he objectifies people through representing them on the basis of religion and nationality and on the other, he shows relationships and experiences between people which completely negate his established metaphors.

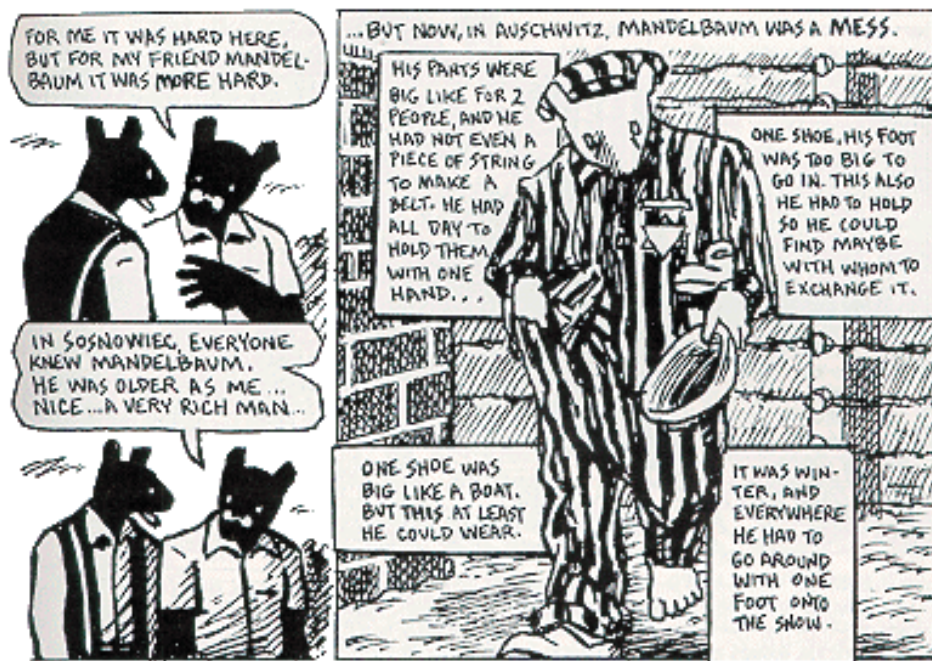


Metaphors not only self destruct but at few instances Spiegelman makes the reader aware of the conscious use of metaphor. In one part of the book Spiegelman himself appears not as mouse but a human wearing a mask of mouse. He deliberately makes the reader aware of the metaphor being implied and that behind the universal mask there are different human beings. This can be seen also as his struggle to identify with the Jew stereotype created during the Holocaust.

At other instances the awareness adds a satirical tone. In the second part when Spiegelman visits his psychiatrist who has lots of cats and dogs, he comments comically asking the reader if that totally ruins his metaphors.

At yet another instance when Vladek Spiegelman hides his family in the basement coal storage, his wife Anya gets terrified by the rats running around them. Adding a very dark tone Vladek consoles her by saying that "They are just rats", being depicted as a mouse himself.

## Visual Representation

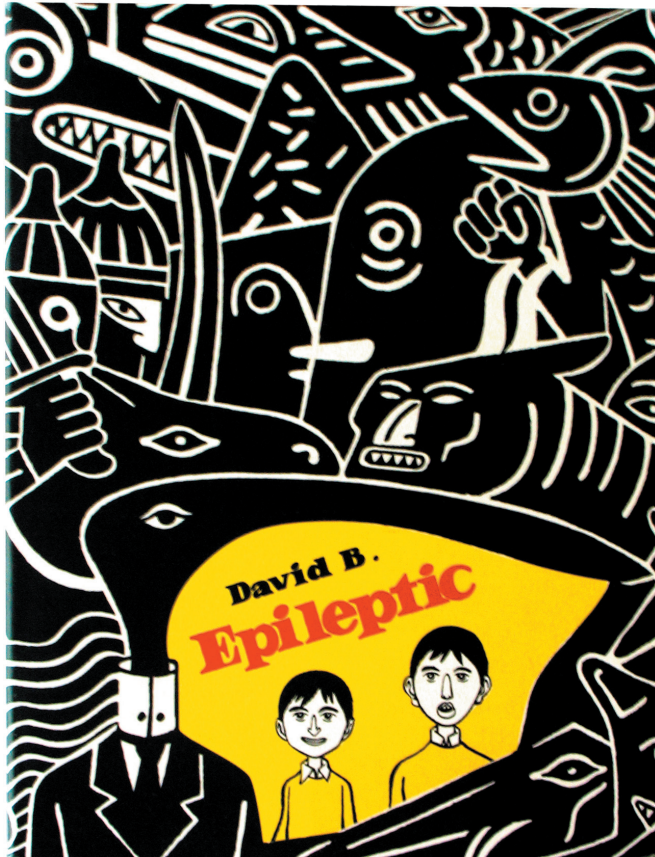


Speigelman appears to be in struggle to represent a reality which he says is unimaginable. The story and the setting has so much gravity that he finds it difficult to comprehend. This gets reflected in his illustration which are very rough and sketchy. At one instance of the book Speigelman himself appears in a conversation with his wife trying to find a metaphorical representation for French people to suit their stance and attitude towards the issue of holocaust.

Although Speigelman chooses a very peculiar representations of various characters in Maus, his depiction of physical world has been very detailed and authentic. During the course of writing the book, Speigelman visited Poland a lot of times to gather enough evidence to support his father's story. This is quite evident in the costumes, architecture and various other physical features. The authentic settings and rough style of illustration together creates a very convincing picture of the era the story is set in.

As the story keeps alternating between the 1940s and 1970s a lot, Speigelman shows the different eras through the use of closure techniques. At the same page where Vladek's story (i.e. 1940s) appears in closed panels, we see Art and Vladek conversing in 1970s in open panels separated by speech bubbles. By this a reader clearly understands the simultaneous occurrence of events in past and present.





# Epileptic

David B.

Epileptic is an acclaimed autobiography in comic book by the revolutionary french cartoonist David B. Regarded as one of the most important graphic novels ever, Epileptic is an honest and forthcoming tale of real human emotions. Its a work of highly personal expression than a chain of events.

But what makes Epileptic a true masterpiece is not what is being told but rather how it is being told. The highly detailed surreal expressions of David B.'s illustrations paint a family portrait that is extremely sad and overwhelmingly imaginative at the same time. As he goes on drawing more than three hundred pages, David B. Captures complex relationships between family members and their fight against epilepsy.

Originally written in French the title *L'ascension du haut mal* translates to 'The Rise of The High Evil'. Referring to Epilepsy the name suggest the rise of the great sickness. The word *L'ascension* also suggests climbing as seen in the recurring images of the family trying climb steep mountains in an unknown terrain. Initially published in six volumes, the name also gets reflected on the covers where one can see the two brothers growing up and the increasing black colour and demonic creatures in their background.



## Overview

The book tells the story of the artist's early childhood and adolescence, focusing on his relationship with his brother and sister. His brother develops severe and intractable epilepsy, causing the family to seek a variety of solutions from alternative medicine, most dramatically by moving to a commune based on macrobiotics principles. As the epileptic brother loses control of his own life, the artist develops solitary obsessions with cartoons, mythology and war. The book's graphic style becomes increasingly elaborate as the children's fantasy life takes over, with their dreams and fears (including epilepsy itself) appearing as living creatures. In brief interludes, the children appear as adults when the artist begins the process of writing the story.

The story is in a way deals with a family's struggle and failure against a disease. A story of a family trying to protect their sick child from people judging him as insane. A failure of science and various medicines to cure a child which results in troubled relations between the family members.



## Imagery and Expression

The most fascinating thing about Epileptic is David B's artwork. As a child David B's fascination for wars and battles in history comes alive in his detailed illustrations where time to time he himself appears as a child standing along Gengis Khan while Mongols attack The great wall of China. Drawing battle fields and wars was a refuge that he took with the helplessness of his brother's sickness.

As the story goes on, a more darker side of David B's imagination is revealed. As Gengis Khan becomes the thing of past, he finds his confidants in form of bizarre creatures and the ghost of his dead grandfather. There appears to be no sense of fear but rather a unusual level of comfort, probably because this scenarios was far less scarier than the reality itself. Not only the author but all the family members find solace in their fantasy. His brother gets fascinated by Hitler and fascism, his sister develop imaginary dead motorcyclists.

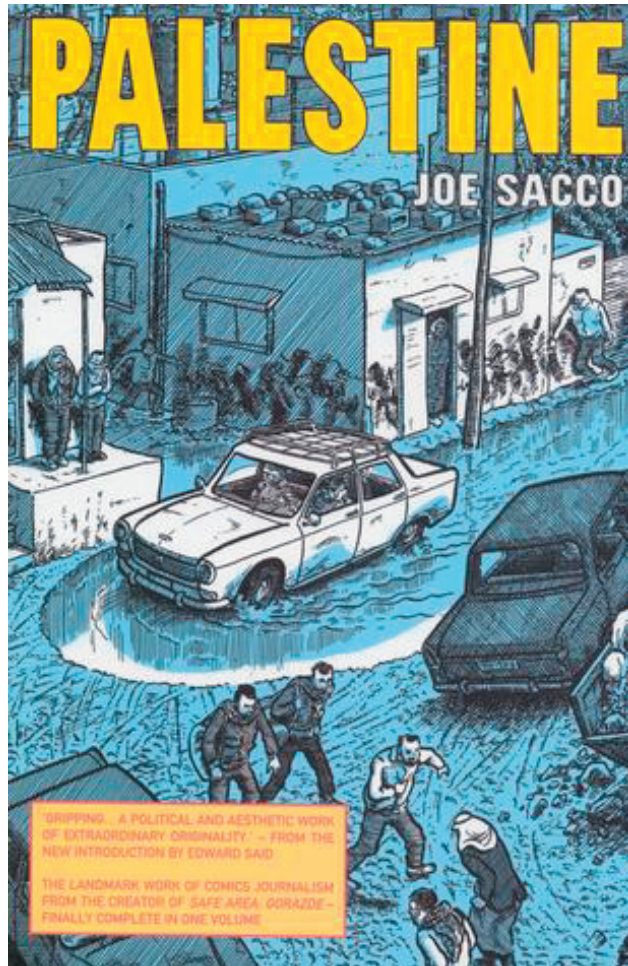
As his brothers sickness gets more and more serious, and as the traditional medicine fails to help him out, the family is forced to try various different alternate medicines and therapies. Here we see how esotericism and macrobiotics influence David B's expression. A distorted vision of the author gets reflected in the interpretation of the people around him. Pages covered with lush illustrations using esoteric symbols and patterns appear where the family is lost in the unknown. Over a period of time they lose all hope as nothing seem to help David B's brother.

A few of the elements keep recurring in imagery. Epilepsy has been interpreted as a dragon. As the sickness keeps growing, the dragon keeps appearing more and more taking control over his brother. Another interpretation of Epilepsy is in form of mountains that family is struggling to climb. No matter how hard they try they can never reach to the top.

Characters in David B's imagination appear as humans with animals' heads. All the doctor's and therapists that the family consulted for his elder brother's sickness have been referred as letters. Like Dr. M and Dr. S. Giving a surreal feel the author puts a layer of imagination and absurdity over reality. Being honest and bluntly stating his feelings, David B. Throws light on selfishness and cruelty of human being.

Since the book has been written over a period of six year there appears a transition from initially detailed illustration to a more dark and heavily inked images towards the latter part of the story. The bitterness of relationships and ruthlessness of life is portrayed through the eyes of a young boy who is sad and the same time angry on his brother for falling sick.





## Palestine

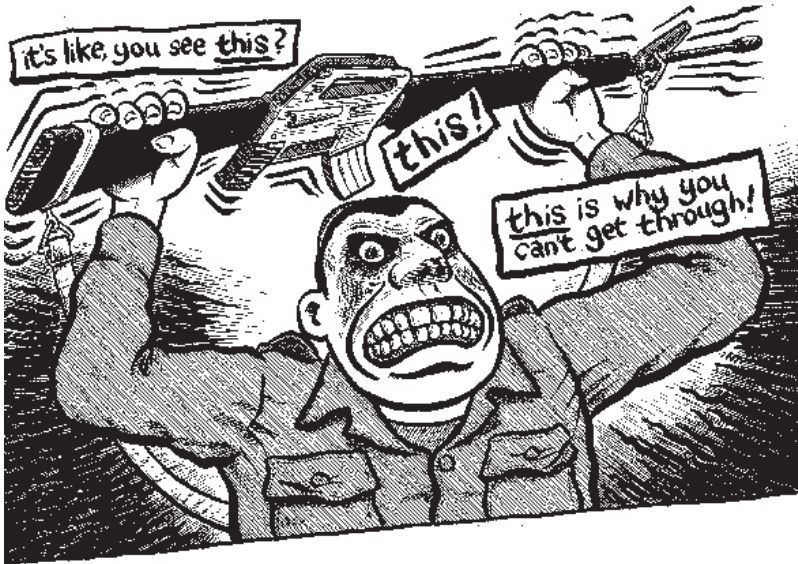
Joe Sacco

Joe Sacco's breakthrough novel of graphic journalism is a landmark of journalism and the art form of comics.

Based on several months of research and an extended visit to the West Bank and Gaza Strip in the early 1990s (where he conducted over 100 interviews with Palestinians and Jews), Palestine was the first major comics work of political and historical nonfiction by Sacco, whose name has since become synonymous with this graphic form of New Journalism. Like Safe Area Gorazde, Palestine has been favourably compared to the Pulitzer Prize-winning Maus, by Art Spiegelman, for its ability to brilliantly navigate such socially and politically-sensitive subject matter within the confines of the comic book medium. Sacco has often been called the first comic book journalist, and he is certainly the best.

Sacco's insightful reportage takes place at the front lines, where busy marketplaces are spoiled by shootings and tear gas, soldiers beat civilians with reckless abandon, and roadblocks go up before reporters can leave. Sacco interviewed and encountered prisoners, refugees, protesters, wounded children, farmers who had lost their land, and families who had been torn apart by the Palestinian conflict.



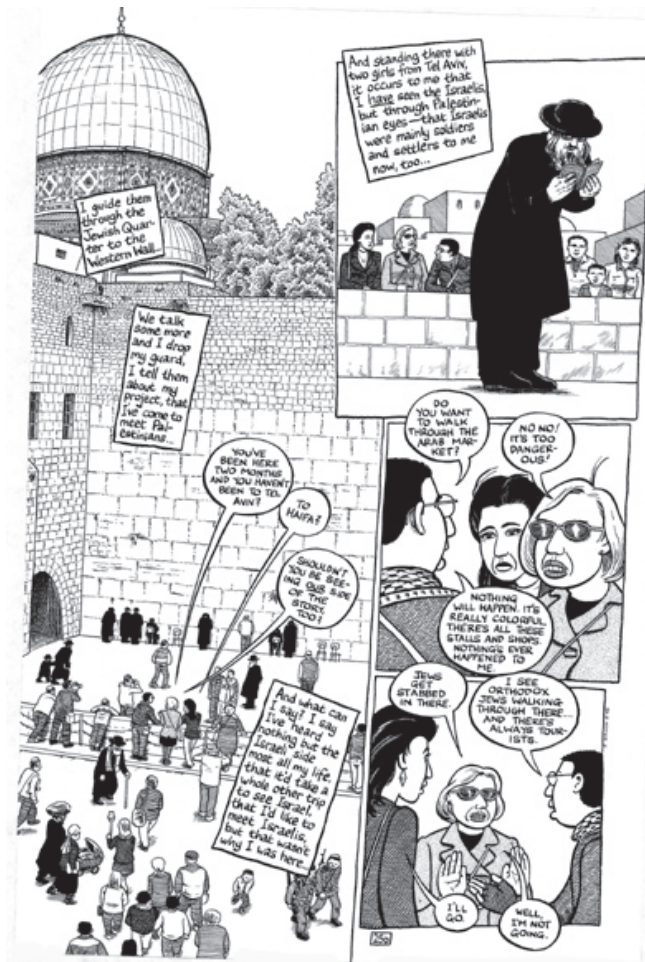


## Narrative and Structure

Palestine uses the vocabulary of comics books to put across complex ideas in numerous ways. The narrative primarily follows Sacco's visit to various different locations in the occupied territories of Israel. He has documented conversations with smallest of details and in a way Palestine is a story of various different people put together. The primary aim of Sacco has been to look at the whole scenario in an objective way, but as he gets involved with the people and situations he can't help but express his personal opinions. In Palestine Sacco positions himself knowingly as the westerner going to the Middle East to confront a reality unfamiliar to his American audience. Sacco does not delude himself that as a 'neutral' observer he can remain invisible and have no effect on the events around him, instead accepting his role and concentrating on his personal experience of the situation.

He uses innovative ways of putting words and images together. At times he uses a very orthodox approach to structure with grid arrangement of panels and at other instances he removes the concept of panels and put the whole page as a single image where words provide for closure. Primarily being a journalist he also employs the structure of news paper columns at places where he talks of history while referring to stated facts.

Although Palestine is being narrated from Sacco's point of view but sometimes the characters telling their story overpower the tone of narration. This also helps Sacco to bring the people he interacted with, more closer to the reader devoid of Sacco's own interpretation.



## Communicating Through Images

Sacco devotes whole pages to drawings of the destitution and squalor prevalent in the disputed territories. With amazing authenticity and detail he puts the reader in his shoes. In his drawings, though most of the panels are presented as a "side view" of Sacco, other characters and their surroundings, there are several panels which present the scene as it looks from Sacco's point of view. There are also panels which present a bird's eye view of places like the refugee camps or Jerusalem.

As he makes the reader well aware of his intentions as a Journalist so does his drawings which portray situations, events and settings as they are. Faces are what Sacco draws a lot of attention. Faces of innocent children unaware of their involvement in the whole scenario, faces of old parents who lost all their children to war, faces of helpless people looking for hope, faces of indifferent soldiers making a mockery of people's emotions.

Sacco uses textures to a great extent. His artwork is a complex mesh of meticulously drawn patterns on clothes, facial expressions, cloudy skies, muddy streets and heap of garbage and rubble. Textures are what makes his drawing as portraits of Palestine.

# Conclusion

Through their personal approach towards drawing and story-telling, artists have explored the medium of comics to tell stories which go beyond mere words and picture. Through their works these artists have gained much respect for a medium that has been neglected by mainstream arts.

Where each artist has something unique to contribute towards the development of comic books as a medium for creative expression it now becomes the responsibility of the up coming comic book artist to experiment and define new ways in which comic books can be seen by drawn and seen by audience as a medium not only self expression but capable of venturing into every realm of communication.

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