

Comics as Graphic Medicine: An Interview with Viivi Rintanen

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Interview

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Finnish artist Viivi Rintanen presented her work in a panel on documentary comics during the second International Amsterdam Comics Conference in 2018. Since 2015, she has been active in fighting the stigma surrounding mental illness in her native Finland by co-creating graphic, first-person narratives with those affected by the various forms of it. Through these visual narratives, which aim to reclaim and humanize notions of “being crazy,” Rintanen remediates intimate anecdotes of marginalized individuals and posts them on her blog, Hulluussarjakuvia (<http://hulluussarjakuvia.sarjakuvablogit.com/>). Following the conference, we spoke to Viivi in the first half of 2019 about the origin of this work, the practice of advocacy drawing, and the effects of her work on both the real-life protagonists and readers.¹

Finland, while having a highly ranked standard of living, has been one of the countries with the highest suicide rate in Europe for many years. However, this seems to be changing. How do you see this welfare/unhappiness paradox? And as someone who is playing a part in trying to change society's approach to mental disorders, have you noticed an improvement in how such illnesses are viewed by people?

What I’m about to say is a huge cultural generalization, but I think many Finns might still recognize the complex reasons I give here. I believe that Finnish history, together with cultural concepts and genetics are the reasons for the high suicide rates. Like most European countries, Finland suffered enormous social and

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¹ Viivi Rintanen’s artist website is <https://cargocollective.com/viivirintanen>.

economic losses in WWII. Culturally, there was (and maybe still is) a code of silence which dictates that feelings such as shame and grief shouldn't be shown to others. The younger generations suffered the consequences, which translated into mental illnesses, domestic violence, and alcohol abuse. In addition to that, Finnish culture puts a strong emphasis on work ethics, which drives countless people into burnouts or self-harming behaviors. "Burning out" is starting to be a common phenomenon among young professionals, myself included.

In Finland, we aren't as family oriented or socially open as in many other countries. Instead, as a culture, we sometimes tend to believe that you should cope on your own and never quit trying. For example, we pride ourselves with the cultural concept of "the Finnish *sisu*," which indicates the particular grit or perseverance of Finnish people. People don't allow themselves to ask for help or share their pain.



"Oh my god! Which cancer is it, not breast, is it?"

"Cancer? I don't have cancer, why'd you think so?"²

I feel that improvements in the attitudes towards the mentally ill or mad are happening, but not enough. In the *Mielenterveysbarometri 2017* (the Finnish national poll that gathers statistics about the attitudes towards people suffering/rehabilitating from mental problems) it was shown that almost a fifth of Finns are scared of mental health rehabilitees (19% wouldn't want a rehabilitating

² Full story in English: SusuPetal & Viivi Rintanen: A Lost Mind, <http://hulluussarjakuvia.sarjakuvablogit.com/2017/10/01/kadoksissa-a-lost-mind/>.

person as their neighbor, and 18% feel uncomfortable with encountering rehabilitees).

Can you tell us something about the misconceptions in regards to mental illness you've encountered more often and how art, comics, or storytelling have a role in fighting them?

These are the most common misconceptions I've come across: psychosis patients are always dangerous and violent; all those diagnosed with personality disorders are cruel and evil; depression is one's own fault and a sign of weakness and/or laziness; eating disorders are shallow, harmless, and just passing phases of teenage girls. I could easily invalidate all of the mentioned arguments because they are not based on scientific facts or lived realities. Instead, they come from the fear of the unknown, sheer ignorance or a lack of education.



"I'm more than tired," thinks Susu who has entered into a depressive state.³

There is a model of "a triangle of distrust" from Finnish researcher Hannu Rätty (1987). In this theoretical model Rätty says that three aspects are supporting the basis of the stigma. One, that mental illness is something unfamiliar or unknown (even unnatural and inhuman) which makes it difficult to learn about and

³ Full story in English: SusuPetal & Viivi Rintanen: An Empty Mind, <http://hulluussarjakuvia.sarjakuvablogit.com/2017/05/31/tyhjapaa-an-empty-mind-23/>.

treat, and that therefore it might be incurable. Two, that because it might be incurable, one can think that “once crazy, always crazy.” A person who has been mentally ill once should always be doubted and distrusted because they could be permanently crazy. And three, that if mental illness is something unknown and incurable, it might be inherently dangerous as most prejudices suggest. So you can see the vicious cycle of the different aspects (unfamiliarity, incurability, dangerousness). We still haven’t been able to understand and treat these differences and forms of suffering with compassion and without this stigma.

As you told us during your panel at the Comics Conference, the idea for your project came to you after working as a cleaner in a mental institution. Can you tell us something about this experience? How did your perception of madness change during that time?

I was 19 when I got a summer job as a cleaner at a Finnish mental ward. I took it because I was studying to be an art teacher and needed a summer job. At first, I was very intimidated, especially by the “crazy” patients, whom I thought would be completely different from the people I had encountered until then in my life. I was wrong: the patients seemed very ordinary from the outside. A seemingly healthy person could be an outpatient of a hospital like the one I worked in.

I worked in the hospital for three summers, which changed me. I understood that mental problems can be a painful yet meaningful part of the human existence. “Going crazy” is not a choice or a weakness, but a result of an extremely difficult or stressful past, susceptible genetics, and bad luck. Little by little I got to know the patients for who they were: lovable human beings who should be helped, not discriminated against.

I heard, saw, and felt how the stigma of a mental diagnosis or madness had an adverse effect on the patients’ lives. It was also a part of my life because I had a secret: for a long time before I started cleaning the ward, I had suffered from an eating disorder. If the patients were worthy of help and understanding, wasn’t I too? This point of view allowed me to shift my course before I would have to be admitted to a similar treatment myself.

The ward was a fascinating observatory for human behavior. I was like a fly on the wall because people usually don’t pay attention to a cleaner. I would clean the soundproof ward office where the staff discussed the patients’ treatment plans. Next, I’d clean the private patient rooms and see the same patients talk about themselves, their treatment, even the medical staff. The ward was also a constant

battle of power and strict hospital hierarchy, in which the doctor won't say hello to me because I'm "just" a cleaner.

My viewpoint was special, and I was thankful for the lessons the patients taught me. This obsession led to my first graphic novel, *Mielisairaalan kesätyttö* ("The Summer Cleaner at a Mental Ward," 2015). The book was greatly received and was voted as the best comic of the year by Finnish comics professionals. The book's main character Vilma is based on me, but other characters are blended so that the actual patients or staff cannot be recognized.



"Do I have the right to reproduce? What if my children inherit this?"⁴

Why comics? And what is the step-by-step process behind the creation of your artwork, the "storyteller method?" Comics come from a heritage of cartooning which has sometimes relied on stereotyping for representing people, is this historical nature of cartoonish representation something you've had to negotiate while depicting people with mental illnesses?

I have always been drawn to comics. It just felt natural to show with images and tell with words. I love the way comics can be consumed in everyone's own pace and enjoyed visually.

⁴ Full story in English: Emilia & Viivi Rintanen: A Special Kind of Mother, <http://hulluussarjakuvia.sarjakuvablogit.com/2018/05/22/aarimmainen-aiti-a-special-kind-of-mother/>.

After the book was published, many people came up to me to tell their life stories of madness and pain. I thought that perhaps I could draw them into webcomics, which could offer a therapeutic release or peer support for people with similar experiences. That's why I started a webcomic called "Comics About Madness" in 2015. The most recent stories have English subtitles and will be featured in a Dutch graphic journalism platform, Drawing the Times in 2019. "Comics about Madness" has published over twenty non-fiction stories of mental illness or madness.

What was the decision-making process behind the use of color? You tend to color outside and between the lines using watercolors that bleed into each other.

People associate colors easily with feelings and moods. I use this attribute of colors to invite the readers to feel the extreme emotions that madness carries: anxiety, fear, sadness, heaviness, emptiness, elated mania, and many more. Then the invisible madness becomes visible, maybe sometimes more relatable.

The coloring style is also thematically appropriate. Like the people who are called crazy, my color won't stay inside the lines. It's unchosen and organic like the madness in all of us.



"I'm so sorry Kerttu. Mom is so sorry."⁵

⁵ Full story in English: Elina & Viivi Rintanen: The Other Mother, <http://hulluussarjakuvia.sarjakuvablogit.com/2018/10/11/rakastaa-ja-ravistella/>.

The use of color has a pragmatic reason too: it's play! My comics are strictly planned out with the storytellers. With the moving and mixing of color, I can finally play and create unexpected things. It's an exciting challenge to make the wild watercolor represent the main characters' feelings and thoughts in a way that carries the story forward.

How does a story go from abstract to visual and how do you deal with issues of privacy?

The blog's idea is inclusive and quite simple: readers send me stories of their experiences of mental problems via email. I call them storytellers. With art grants, I'm able to choose some of the stories I receive to be featured in "Comics About Madness." Then I script the stories with the storytellers and draw them into webcomics according to the storytellers' wishes. Every step is discussed and confirmed with the storyteller via email (in ridiculously long email conversations). All the stories I receive remain confidential; I only share them if they get published with the storyteller's permission. Most storytellers want to remain anonymous behind the comic character but still are given a chance to speak for themselves and to be seen as humans with thoughts, feelings, and experiences.

By the way: international stories are very welcome and can be sent to hulluussarjakuvia@gmail.com.

The primary purpose of "Comics About Madness" is to reduce the stigma surrounding madness and mental illness. This is why I have to be extra aware of the stereotypes that lurk everywhere. It's a complicated process in which I have to be mindful about the storyteller's experience, my knowledge of representations, and common misconceptions of different forms of madness or medical diagnoses, so I don't make stigmatizing portrayals by accident.

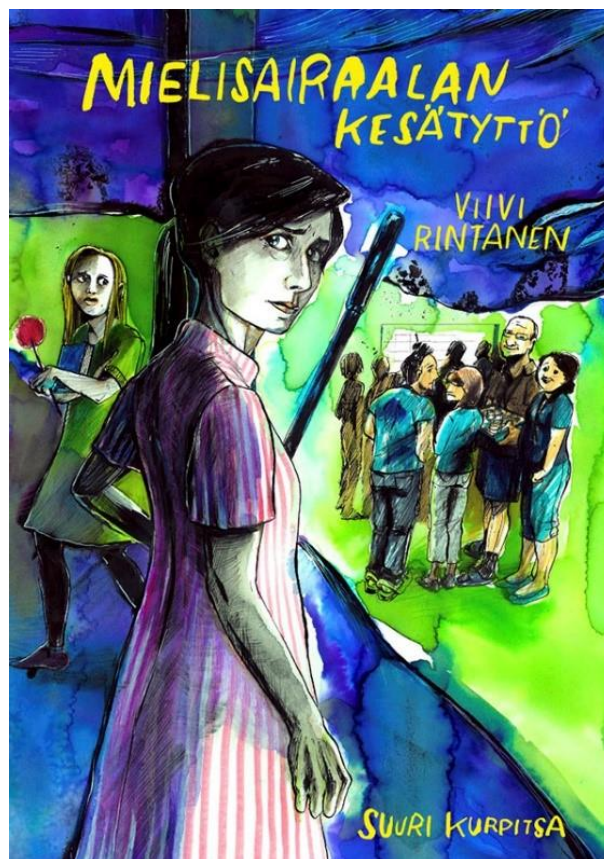
On a side note: for my master's thesis in art education I studied how I represented the stigma in the webcomic and how the stigma could be represented in a way that would reduce it.⁶

What's interesting about your work is not only the art itself but also the way you showcase it. You have chosen the blog form, which allows you to communicate directly with both your audience and the subjects you draw,

⁶ For an abstract of the thesis in English, scroll down at: <https://aaltodoc.aalto.fi/handle/123456789/34015>.

while maintaining your independence. What has the reaction of your readers been and what is your relationship with them? What are the limitations of self-publishing?

I chose the blog form to be as democratic and accessible as I can. If I make a mistake, anyone can comment, and I'm held accountable publicly. This way many viewpoints and misconceptions can be discussed right below the stories in the comments section. I feel it's the most ethical option, to allow the polyphony. I hope the blog will continue to be free of charge to read in the future. That makes the comics accessible for the people who sometimes find themselves in a worse socio-economical position than "the normal and sane."



The cover of *Mielisairaalan kesätyttö* (2015)

The only fundamental limitations of self-publishing are money and time. I'd love to publish more but don't want to drive myself to the verge of burn-out and financial bankruptcy.

Nevertheless, my readers are the best! I get a lot more stories than I can draw, but every single one enriches my knowledge of this field, madness, and the

stigma I'm fighting against. I get a lot of positive feedback and invaluable thank yous.

How do you see your project evolving? What is next for you?

I'm working on a collection of "Comics About Madness," which includes new, autobiographical material about the psychotherapy process. I'm also exploring the therapeutic potential that making comics has with a graphic storytelling workshop for people who suffer from eating disorders in collaboration with the support of the Finnish Cultural Foundation's Art for Institutions grant. I hope to continue with "Comics About Madness" for as long as possible and wish to participate in the field of Graphic Medicine as an arts practitioner. And I'm keeping my eyes open for translation opportunities, too, to make all of my comics accessible to an English speaking audience.