

The Edinburgh International Book Festival: graphic novels for healing

Imagine being told you have third stage cancer.

Now imagine you are only 31 when you are told this.

And now imagine you are already four months pregnant.

All of this happened to **Matilda Tristram**. Matilda was already an illustrator and animator when she received this devastating news; she eventually decided to write a comic journal to record what was happening to her, first posting it on her website in monthly instalments then turning it into a book *Probably Nothing: a diary of not-your-average nine months*.

Katie Green suffered from severe anorexia throughout her teenage years. Like many anorexics, her eating disorder wasn't about wanting to look like a model; it was about getting control over part of her life, a life which she found impossible to cope with in any other way. She received treatment, returned to school and looked – but didn't feel – better; then she went to university and sought help from an alternative therapist – a therapist whose help consisted of grooming her for sexual abuse. It's taken Katie years to write about all of this: her graphic novel *Lighter Than My Shadow* was published last year.



Matilda and Katie were both at the **Edinburgh International Book Festival** to talk about their experiences and their books with **Stuart Kelly**.

Katie wrote *Lighter Than My Shadow* when she found that all the

other books she read about eating disorders either told sufferers that all they needed was positive thinking or alternatively that they were doomed and would never recover. She wanted to give people hope, but she also wanted them to understand how hard mental illness can be. She feels that her book (which is over 500 pages long) may be almost too much for newly-diagnosed anorexics, but hopes that it will help their families and friends to understand how they feel, and why. Matilda wrote *Probably Nothing* partly as something to do during the long, arduous – and very boring – hours of chemotherapy. She also wanted to help people understand cancer patients' experiences.

Do they feel that writing was therapeutic? Matilda thought 'not really' – it didn't make her feel any better at the time, psychologically or physically. It was a distraction from the fast-moving horrors of her everyday life – and it did help her to tell people what *not* to say to a cancer patient. Bombarded with well-meaning comments and advice, she was too polite to tell people to shut up face to face, but in her drawings she could explain. Both writers agree that it's sometimes been easier for them to communicate through their books; constantly talking about what has happened to them can be painful and tiring. They also wanted to convey the sheer randomness of their illnesses; in a blame culture, says Stuart, this is perhaps something we need to hear. Matilda finds that people want to know what caused her cancer (no-one does), 'Is it inherited?' – it's a way of protecting themselves 'None of my family had it so I'm safe.' Katie says that many people still struggle to understand mental illness and (sometimes encouraged by the media) see eating disorders as a lifestyle choice. She didn't choose anorexia, 'I thought at the time that I was doing everything right.'

Matilda was writing 'in the moment' – she felt she couldn't *not* write the book and says it's the only piece she's ever done in which she didn't worry about form or style 'It just

came out...I didn't know what would happen next until it happened.' For Katie, writing about events that had taken place years earlier was hard. She was surprised by how much she was affected by revisiting the past, and she wrote at least twenty drafts of *Lighter Than My Shadow* before the time felt right to publish. In the end she developed a kind of immunity, thinking of herself in the book as a character on the page, not as Katie Green today.

Neither author, observes Stuart, plays into the image of 'the earthly saint in waiting', the 'brave and noble survivor.' Matilda feels that people often want to think of cancer patients as positive and tell them they will gain from their experience; in fact, she says, it's a lie. 'You don't so much learn from it as live through it.' For Katie, if there has been any lesson it's that, unlike the book, the story never ends; 'This is a journey that will continue for me.'

So why choose the graphic novel (or comic, as Matilda prefers)? Both Katie and Matilda came late to the form; Katie admits she thought comics were 'for people who couldn't really read' until, at 22, she was given a copy of **Art Spiegelman's** *Maus* 'It turned my life upside down.' Matilda's earlier drawings did contain stories, but it was **Deborah Levy**, her tutor at the Royal College of Art, who encouraged her to write more. Her work in children's television also taught her that the easiest way to write fifty episodes of a series every year is via fast storyboarding

Katie felt she could do something different with images; she's 'a visual person' and suggests that graphic novels can offer an immersive experience and are perhaps the best medium for conveying strong emotions and creating a sense of atmosphere without being too explicit. A picture, says Matilda, can explain things that are just too difficult to put into words; irony can be created by juxtaposing an image with just one line of dialogue. Cancer and pregnancy are both such complicated things that she wanted to draw them as simply as

she could.

Katie initially represents her illness as a black cloud hovering above her character's head, but as the story moves on to her sexual abuse, the images move inside her body. This enabled her to show how her own understanding of her illness had changed; from seeing anorexia as a monster outside of herself, she came to realise that it was actually a part of her, a part that she had to work with and manage. Although her thought patterns no longer control her eating, they still affect her in other ways; she now works obsessively to create perfect art; 'You can't move on until you acknowledge that mental illness might always creep in through the back door.'

Over the past five years, Stuart notes, far more female illustrators have started to write graphic novels, often about real-life events (**Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis***, **Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home***.) Matilda points out that the graphic form gives authors total control; they don't have to answer to anyone and they aren't expected to write in a certain traditional way. Graphic novelist **Joe Sacco** has said that a graphic image can't be subedited or messed about. Katie agrees: both women have a background in animation, but in film collaboration is key, 'In a graphic novel you can just do your own thing.' Her own editor was, however, excellent, helping Katie to realise where she was saying too much, and not even questioning her use of the blank page to create essential pauses in the narrative, places for the reader's imagination to take a turn. Visual rhythm and pacing are, she says, only possible in this format.

Matilda's family and friends have been very supportive of her writing. Although she hopes that her son James (who is currently crawling around at the front of the tent, happy as can be), won't be interested in *Probably Nothing* for a while, she enjoys re-reading parts of the book with her partner Tom; it is, she explains, a record of their lives, not just of her illness, with memories of fun times and even jokes. A scene in

which someone at a party puts his face (uninvited) on what he thinks is Matilda's pregnancy bump (it is actually her colostomy bag) is – at least in retrospect – hilarious. Other moments are more poignant. Matilda drops the teabags one day and for that moment this tiny event becomes worse than everything else; in her fragile state this one last straw almost drives her over the edge. 

Katie's family could not share her wish to be honest and open about her past in public, so she is especially appreciative of their huge support despite their different ways of coping. She particularly wants the book to show that eating disorders are not (as is sometimes suggested) the fault of the sufferer's parents.

So what next for Matilda and Katie? Both women hope to write more graphic novels (Matilda missed the form so much she even wrote three extra strips to accompany the book's release) and more for children, but they also want to get away from writing about their illnesses. At the moment though, Katie just wants to have a rest.

This was a very interesting and thought-provoking session. Katie Green and Matilda Tristram are both hugely engaging and communicative speakers, and Stuart Kelly's chairing was outstanding.

Lighter Than My Shadow by Katie Green is published by Jonathan Cape.

Probably Nothing by Matilda Tristram is published by Viking.