

I Learned the Truth at Seventeen...

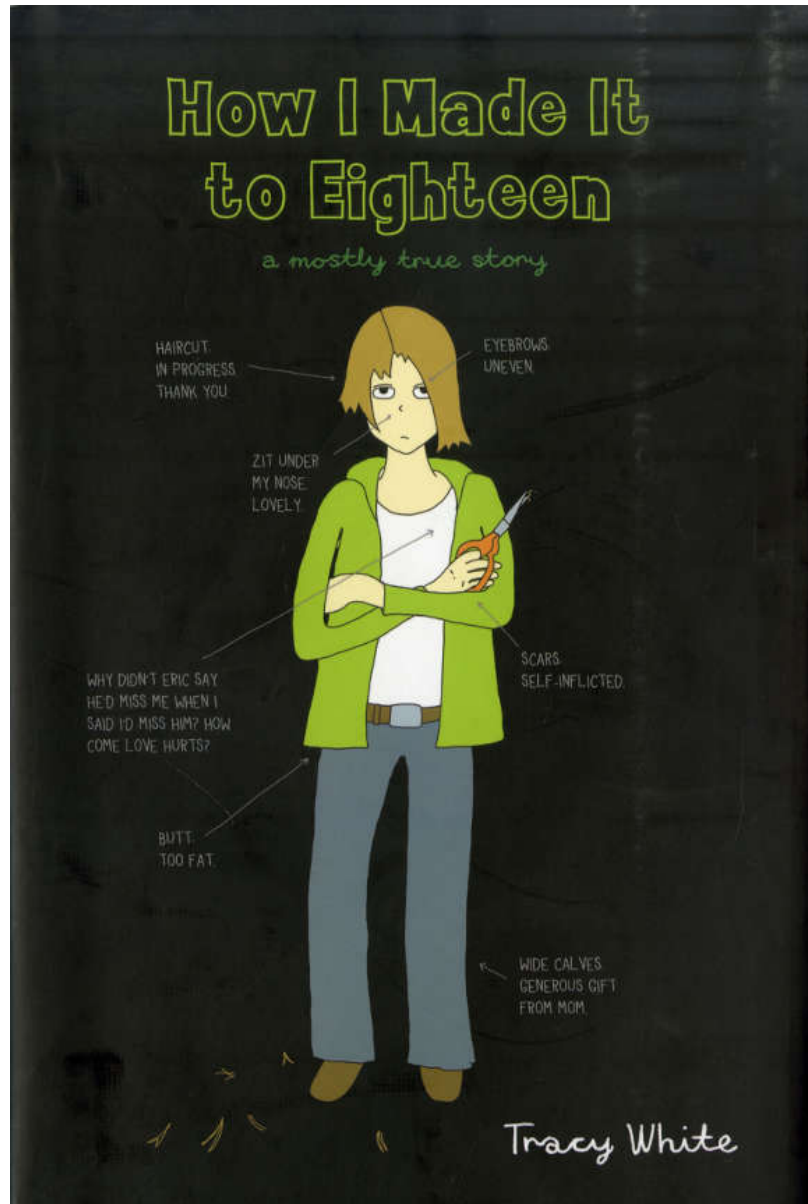
By Karen Green

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Another summer, another ALA conference. This year, it was Washington D.C.'s turn to be invaded by 25,000+ librarians and vendors, wilting in the humidity and 100° heat as we tried to figure out how best to serve our communities in a time of decreasing budgets and increasing user autonomy. But always, always, either overtly or just below the surface, the inexorable tom-tom beat of "Comics....comics....comics..."

The indomitable John Shableski, of Diamond Book Distributors, organized three days' worth of continuous graphic novels programming, in which I was lucky enough to take part. Midday on a brutally hot Sunday, I chatted with Tracy White, creator of the just-released graphic novel *How I Made It to Eighteen*. I had met Tracy, briefly, in an aisle at MoCCA Fest this past April, and she'd given me a small brochure that promoted her forthcoming book. It intrigued me enough to order it right away; the day after it arrived, Shableski asked me to do the interview. A happy accident of timing! Count me IN.



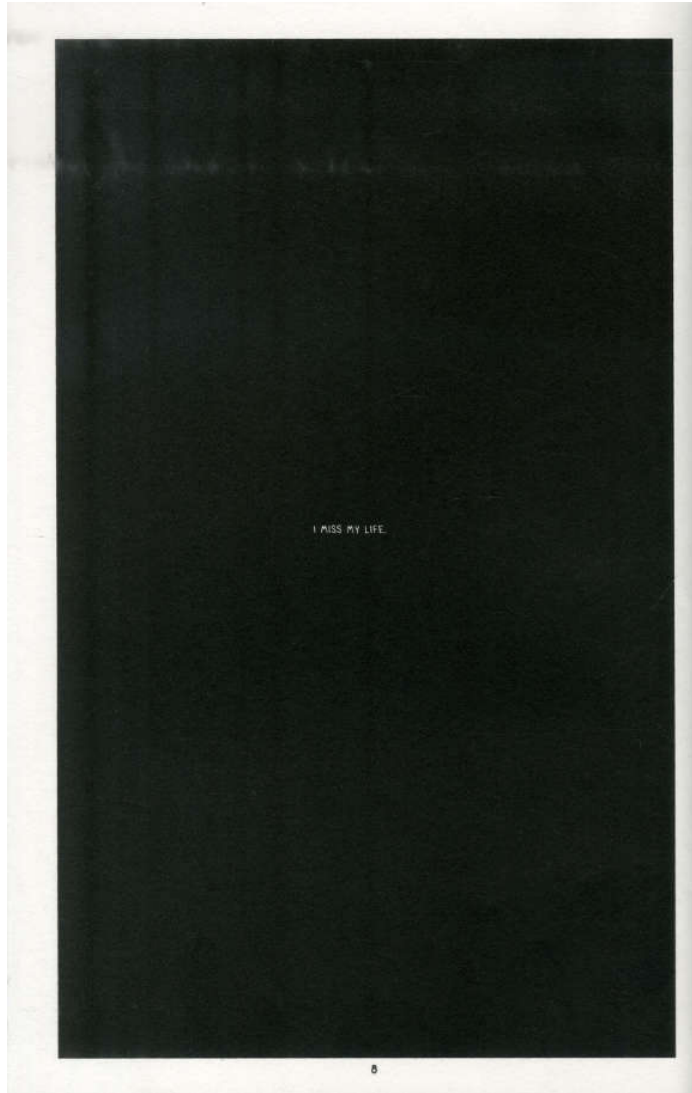
Before I launch into our Q&A, a short description of the book itself. Subtitled "A Mostly True Story," *How I Made It to Eighteen* chronicles the experience of Stacy Black, who, at seventeen, checked herself into the Golden Meadows psychiatric hospital, after experiencing a total nervous collapse. It includes interviews with friends, transcripts of hospital records, flashbacks, and an unflinching perspective on relationships both positive and negative. It is drawn in a simple, spare style that seems as stripped down as Stacy's therapeutic goals.

And so, to the questions, with answers that include both Tracy's responses and my own ruminations, to which, I trust, you've grown accustomed. The distinction between the two may be....fictionalized.

You were on a panel devoted to Young Adult titles at MoCCA Fest; do you think of your book as a Young Adult book?

Tracy remarked that it could be seen as such, certainly, since it addresses issues that

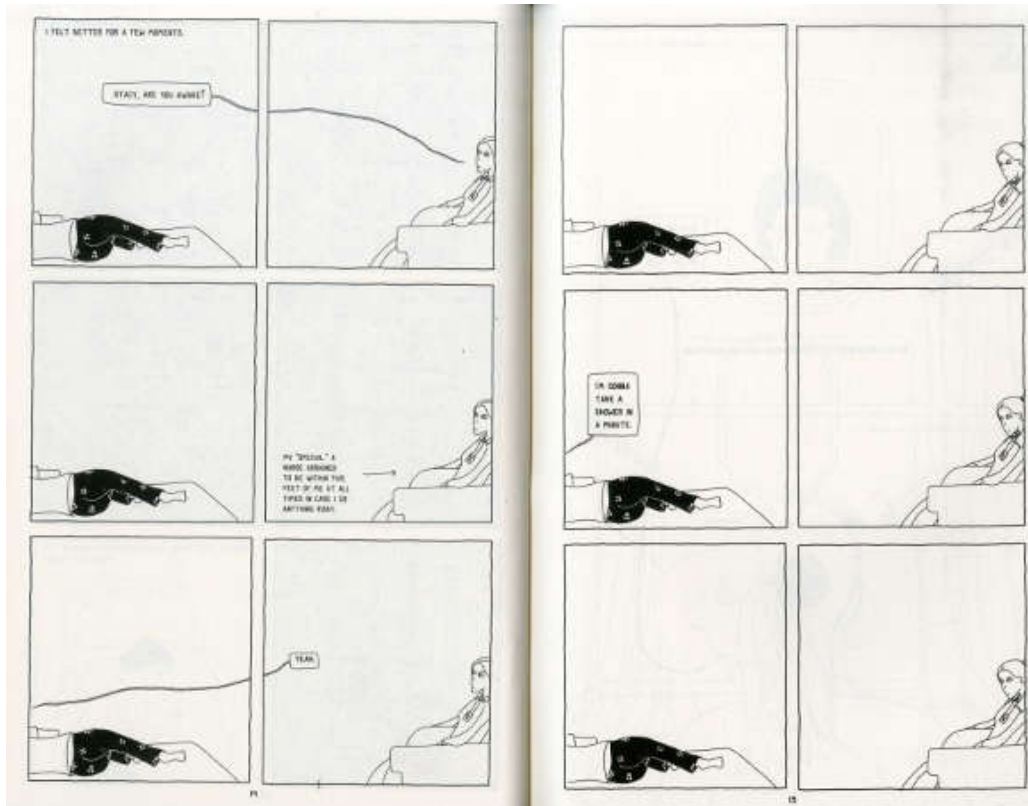
adolescents and teens can and do face, but that it also resonates for adults who both vividly recall their own teen years and may now have teenage children. This is a point with which I concur absolutely, and which leads me to my principal *bête noire* of comics reviewing, in which stories with young protagonists are assessed solely in terms of a young audience. This is the kind of attitude that would relegate many a Charles Dickens or Mark Twain classic to the YA section only, not to mention modern novels such as, say, *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*, which was received and reviewed as a work for grown-ups despite its youthful protagonist. I covered this point extensively in a column a couple of years ago, about DC's now-defunct Minx line of graphic novels, some of which are in our collection here. Reviewers: a story about a teenager is not necessarily a teenage story.



Your story opens with an almost entirely black page, with a single sentence in a tiny font in the center. When I talked to a group of medical students recently, about a couple of graphic novels on the subject of illness, one mentioned apologetically that her favorite panel was one that, like this one, was black with no imagery, but only text. Do you have any thoughts about your choice, or about her reaction?

Tracy's response, I thought, got to the heart of the nature of a graphic novel. The blackness

of the page is the depths into which her protagonist Stacy had sunk, and the minuscule cry, "I miss my life," peeking out from the inky darkness is her *cri de coeur* from that black hole. The color of the page IS an image, and functions illustratively just as if it were a drawing of the tormented Stacy herself; better, perhaps, because the reader's reaction is instinctive rather than interpretive. It is a technique with a literary lineage dating back at least to Lawrence Sterne's 18th-century masterpiece, *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy*, where a solid black page follows a description of Parson Yorick's death. The panels depicting Stacy that follow on the next several pages, with the exception of a brief flashback, present her curled up with a pillow, on her bed, but that prefatory blackness has already set the tone.



Each chapter—the titles of which mark the length of her hospitalization—begins with an excerpt from "Stacy Black"'s patient records. Are these your actual patient records?

They are. How did she get them? She just wrote and asked. Who knew?

Tracy actually had a slideshow of images in which she'd included a scan of the cover letter she'd gotten from the real "Golden Meadows" when they sent her the patient files she'd asked for. In the address and salutation, they spelled her name "Tracey." This broke my heart a little. Such a painful time in her life, and all her tortured history lying right there before them in black-and-white, and they couldn't even spell her name right. That's...that's just wrong.

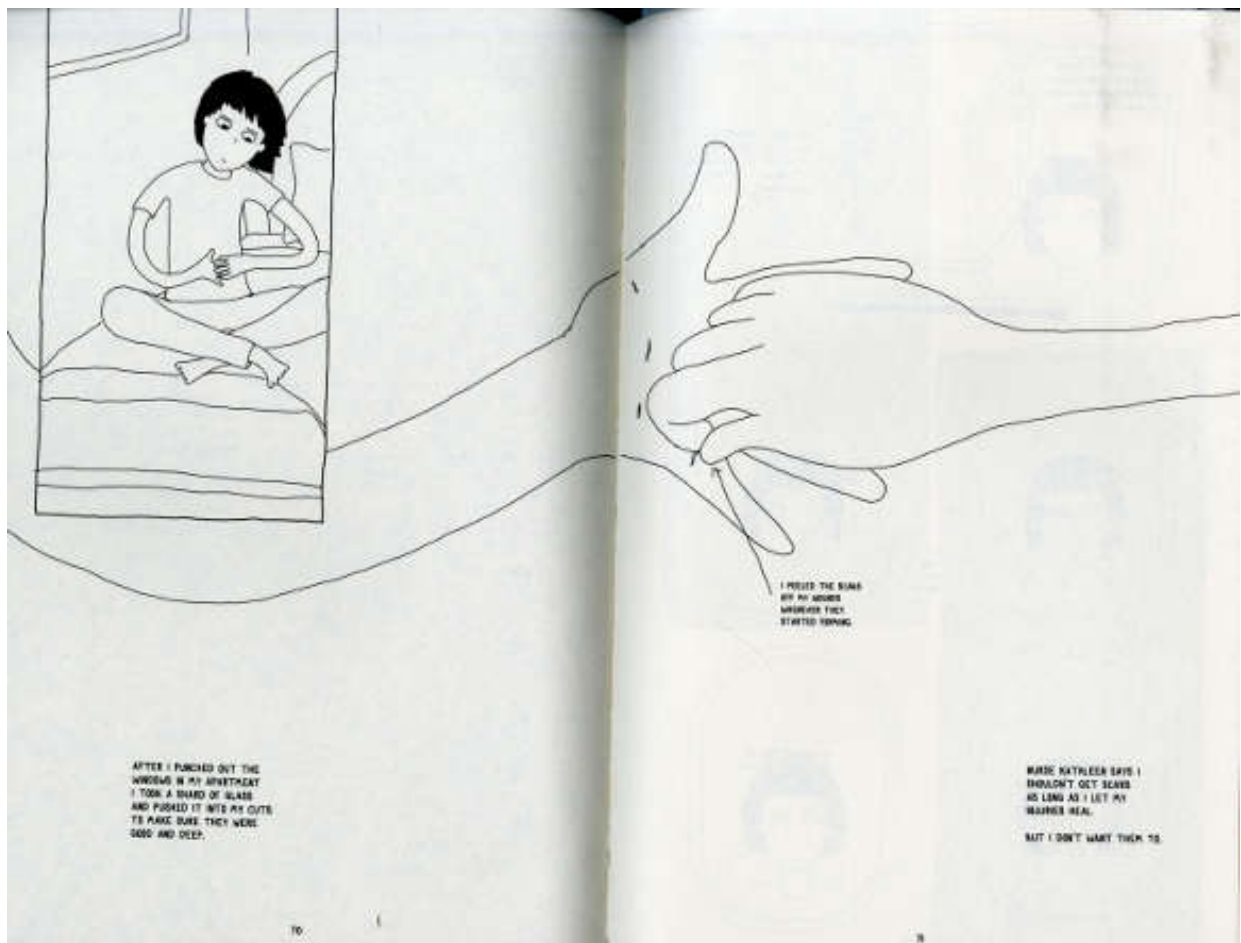
You draw with a very simple, clean line. Is that your preferred style of drawing, or do you change styles depending on the topic? What made it the right style for this story?

"That's the only way I know how to draw."

What's nice about this response is that it actually answers both questions. I remember reading once that the term "handwriting" is misleading, since it's the brain that shapes how we form letters; for example, if we had to write with our left foot, we'd form letters the same way—eventually—as we do using our hands. So it is an innate thing that causes artists to draw as they do and, in a book that represents an inner journey, it is only fitting that the artist use the most instinctive technique she has.

Memoir has become an increasingly popular genre, both in graphic novels and in prose. Do you feel your slightly-fictionalized story fits that genre? What are your thoughts on the popularity of memoir?

"I'm a storyteller. I tell stories." Tracy was quick to establish the fictional nature of this story, despite its foundation in truth. (In fact, even the age is slightly wrong; a true memoir would have had to be titled "How I Made It to Nineteen," as the events happened to her when she was 18, not 17.) Fictionalizing the story gave her freedom she might not otherwise have had, as memory is a notoriously fickle writing partner. Tracy had kept diaries of her time at "Golden Meadows," but they revealed only the most mundane details of daily life. "Memory is a tricky thing," she noted. She turned to friends from her teen years, one of whom she'd met in the hospital itself, to glean their memories along with hers. This endeavor was met with mixed success, as revisiting that time was painful for some of them and not all her friends enjoyed the journey. Nor did everything jibe; at times, events recalled by others rang no bells for Tracy herself.



Despite the fictionalization, it does read like memoir, especially once you know that the records and the friends are real. Memoir is an increasingly dominant genre, whether *Persepolis* or *Fun Home* or *Stitches* in "our" graphic world or *Broken* or *Julie and Julia* or *No Impact Man* in the world of prose.

One of my fellow librarians here at Columbia maintains that people read memoirs about extreme behavior so they don't have to experience it themselves, such as hurtling through the depths of substance abuse or cooking every recipe in Julia Child's cookbook or living for an entire year with no environmental impact. He notes that people consume memoirs like fiction, but with the frisson that comes from knowing it really happened: James Frey marketed *A Million Little Pieces* as fiction with no luck, but when he remarketed it as memoir he sold it *and* got chosen for Oprah's Book Club.

Certainly the success of reality television, from the confessional swamps of "The Jerry Springer Show" through the real-life conflict in the endless small-claims courts of daytime television to the emotional drama of potential marriages or dramatic weight loss or careers with (heaven help us) Donald Trump, has had an effect on the entertainment preferences of the public. Whether it is the vicarious thrill of another's life or the possibility that one day, the viewer himself may find his way into such a situation, the gladiatorial seduction of the shows cannot be denied. I confess I'm not a huge fan myself; I prefer my reality with a touch of craft. And I guess I prefer it with a touch of art, as well, since the only memoirs I've read have been graphic ones.

My personal preferences aside, however, the study of memoir is growing. A Google search for academic memoir-course syllabi yields tens of thousands of hits for courses that teach how to write them and how to read them. Which leads to the next question...

For what kind of curriculum—elementary, secondary, advanced—do you picture your book being assigned and what would you hope the instructor was trying to get students to understand?

Tracy acknowledged that a natural fit for the book is with teenagers, if only for the relevance of the story to their own lives. "Reading how someone else got through the problems you face in your own life can be comforting." It can certainly be difficult for teens to believe that there's a way out on the other side; middle school and high school can seem almost post-apocalyptic in their harshness, desolation, and interminableness. The occasional message-in-a-bottle from the real world can contribute a little buoyancy. But, as is clear above, there's plenty of room for such a memoir in a university reading list as well.

In a later conversation, Tracy added, "As a storyteller I'm interested in connecting to people. I do that by thinking about the universal experiences we all go through — a first kiss, anxiety about a test, feeling awkward, the list goes on — and then writing about them from my own point of view. I'm an only child so maybe that's why the idea of discovering that we all share certain emotional moments is so important to me."

Yeah. What she said.

Does Stacy get along well with guys?

MARIA

STACY ALWAYS HAS GUYS AFTER HER. AND WHY NOT, SHE'S CUTE AND YES SHE HATES THAT WORD, BUT IT'S TRUE. STILL I KNOW SHE'D RATHER BE CALLED DIFFERENT OR UNIQUE OVER CUTE ANY DAY. ME? I'M HAPPY BEING CALLED CUTE. IT'S BETTER THAN WHAT I'M SOMETIMES CALLED 'CAUSE I'M FULL FIGURED NOT THIN LIKE HER.

SHE'S ALWAYS COMPLAINING ABOUT HER BODY BUT SHE CAN FIT INTO JUST ABOUT ANYTHING, INCLUDING A DRESS OF MINE SHE BORROWED THAT NOW FEELS LIKE A FAT DRESS WHEN I PUT IT ON. NEVER LEND CLOTHES TO SOMEONE SKINNER THAN YOU. HER PROBLEM IS THAT SHE DOESN'T THINK SHE'S PRETTY AND SHE HAS NO CONFIDENCE. SHE'S SOMEHOW NEVER LEARNED TO TELL GUYS TO FUCK OFF.

TAKE ERIC, SHE NEEDS TO TELL HIM TO FUCK OFF — HE TREATS HER LIKE CRAP. I HATE ERIC. WHEN I CAME TO VISIT HER LAST WINTER I MET HIM AND HE BARELY SAID TWO WORDS TO ME. CLEARLY HE THOUGHT I WAS A THREAT TO HIS DOMINION. CLEARLY HE WANTED ME TO LEAVE. HE'D TELL STACE WHAT TO DO, AND HOW TO FEEL. YOU KNOW LIKE "STACY, WHY ARE YOU GETTING UPSET?. DON'T BE A BABY. WHY ARE YOU SO OVERLY SENSITIVE?"

STACE WAS ALL "HE'S AN ARTIST AND HE'S HAVING A HARD TIME." SHE COULDN'T SEE WHAT HE WAS DOING. I DOUBT SHE'D TELL HIM TO STOP EVEN IF SHE COULD. MAYBE SHE'LL LEARN HOW TO DO THAT IN THE HOSPITAL. HAVE SOME SELF-ESTEEM, I MEAN.

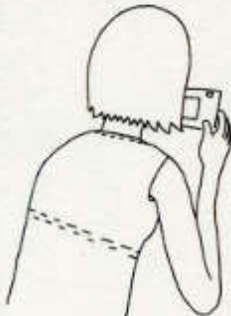


VIOLET

I HELPED STACY GET HER BOYFRIEND OUR FIRST SEMESTER AT BOARDING SCHOOL. SHE'S PRETTY SHY. PLUS SHE HAD LIKE NO EXPERIENCE. I REMEMBER THERE WAS THIS ONE GUY WHO CAME AROUND AFTER HOURS ONE NIGHT WHEN WE FIRST GOT THERE AND SINCE I WAS ON THE TOP BUNK I HEAR HIM SAY TO HER, "I FEEL LIKE I'M KISSING A SIXTH GRADER." CAN YOU IMAGINE? I MEAN THE GIRL HAD NO CONFIDENCE TO BEGIN WITH.

ANYWAY WE PLANNED OUT TO THE LAST DETAIL HOW SHE'D GET THIS OTHER GUY, ALEX, TO NOTICE HER. ON OUR WAY TO SKI TEAM PRACTICE STACY TOLD HIM WE HAD SOME VERMONT BUD — AND THEN I SAID I WAS TOO COLD AND THEY WENT OFF TO SMOKE AND WELL THAT WAS THAT...THEY HOOKED UP AND THEN THEY WERE TOGETHER.

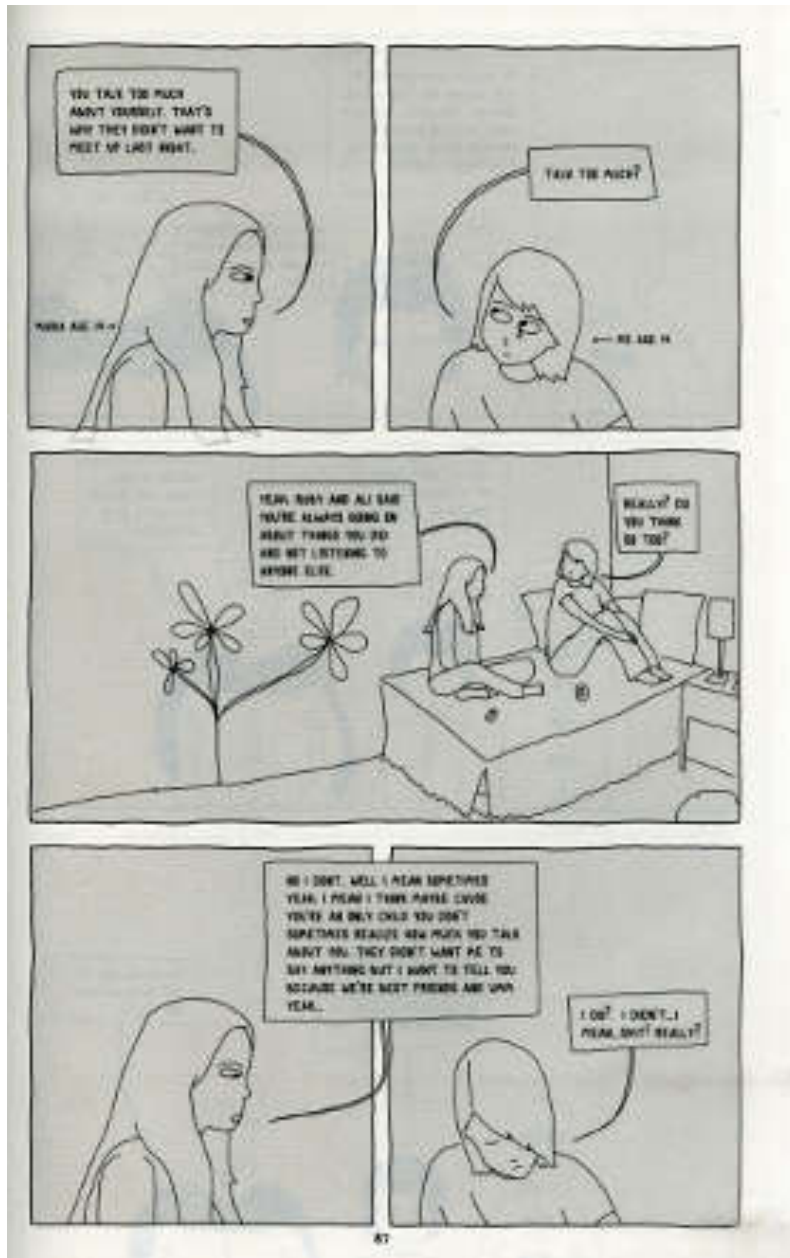
I WAS HAPPY FOR HER BUT THEN I NEVER SAW HER BECAUSE SHE WAS ALWAYS "ALEX THIS" AND "ALEX THAT" AND SHE HAD NO TIME FOR ANYONE ELSE TILL HE BROKE UP WITH HER FOR A SENIOR AND THEN SHE NEEDED SOMEONE TO CRY TO ABOUT HOW SHE SHOULD'VE BEEN A MORE PERFECT GIRLFRIEND. AT REHAB THEY SAY DEPEND ON YOURSELF, NOT ON ANYONE ELSE FOR YOUR HAPPINESS. MAYBE THEY'LL TELL HER THAT AT MEADOWS TOO.



I hated the character of Violet, one of the four friends whose reminiscences begin each chapter. She was such a therapy snob. Was I supposed to hate her?

Well, apparently not. All four of Stacy's friends are close friends of Tracy's to this day, and their memories helped enormously in shaping the book. I need to be more tolerant.





Given the passive-aggressive self-absorption of Stacy's boyfriend Eric and the casual cruelty of friends like Maria and Drea, do you have a stand on who is meaner, boys or girls?

"They're equally mean. They just use different tools."

Karen Green is Columbia University's Ancient/Medieval Studies Librarian and Graphic Novel selector.

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