Mansfield and Me

Intertextuality & The Autobiographical Impulse in the Graphic Novel—An Exegesis

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Research Question

How does the practice of intertextuality in the graphic novel, such as interspersing autobiography and fiction with fact, illuminate the auto/biographical narrative?

Abstract

This research explores the practice of intertextuality in graphic memoirs and biographies. As Graham Allen writes, “Meaning becomes something which exists between a text and all the other texts to which it refers and relates, moving out from the independent text into a network of textual relations. The text becomes the intertext” (1).

I have created a graphic memoir and biography employing intertextuality as a critical framework. Using Katherine Mansfield’s short stories, letters, diaries, photographs and existing biographies, I have told her story and my own. Her famous words “Oh to be a writer, a real writer” have been a touchstone as I explore how I became a “real writer” in relation to her position as an iconic New Zealand artist. In my practice and research I grapple with questions of authenticity, autobiography, and the fine line between fact and fiction. I examine the comics medium, analysing how its physiology shapes the telling of a biographical/autobiographical story.
Introduction

I decided to write a graphic novel about Katherine Mansfield in the spring of 2012. She’d played a recurring cameo role in the comics blog I’d been maintaining since July 2010 (sarahelaing.wordpress.com), questioning my claim to be a writer, and providing a blueprint of what a ‘real writer’ should look and act like. I felt as though I was suffering from a haunting, or another manifestation of the fangirl ³ identity I’d been exploring since discovering Madonna as a child.

I’d first heard of Katherine Mansfield through my grandmother – she had grown up in Karori and told stories about that naughty Kathleen Beauchamp and her well-to-do family who, at one point, had lived down the road. She’d sent her four sons off to the Karori school that featured in Mansfield’s famous story ‘The Doll’s House’. I continued to encounter Mansfield at high school, where we studied her stories and were taken on a Wellington pilgrimage, and then at university, where she was claimed as a lesbian by the Women’s Studies department, and analysed in the English department. Later, as a graphic designer in Thorndon, I worked a few blocks away from her Fitzherbert Terrace memorial park, and down the hill from her birthplace. I was invited to redesign the brochure for the Katherine Mansfield Birthplace Museum, and sat at her kitchen table for the briefing.

Yet, despite her recurring presence in my life, I didn’t actually read her biographies or her notebooks and letters until I started on this project. I began a close reading exercise, filling journals with notes and illustrations in response to Mansfield texts. I sated myself with biographical facts and wondered if it were significant that I’d finished reading Antony Alper’s biography, The Life of Katherine Mansfield, on the 90th anniversary of her death. I discovered the

³ Fangirl: a female fan, especially one who is obsessive about comics, film, music, or science fiction.
immediacy of her letters and journals; I drew tenuous connections between her experiences and mine.

In this exegesis I intend to critically examine how I went about creating a graphic novel. I will review the literature that has informed and influenced my work, and provided a critical framework. These works include biographies and memoirs, other graphic novels, and critical texts discussing comics and literary theory. I will explore one of the key critical frameworks, intertextuality, in relation to my own and others’ work. I will discuss the autobiographical impulse, the art of memoir and how it differs from novels, and what it is about the comics medium that lends itself to autobiography. I will investigate issues surrounding autobiography, such as authenticity and “autofictionalography”, and the wiliness of memory. Taking a close look at the structure and peculiarities of the comics medium, I will consider how that insists on a particular way of storytelling. I will reflect on my process/methodology, how it evolved in the creation of my graphic novel, and how I experimented with form, creating multiple iterations of my graphic novel.

Creating *Mansfield and Me* has been a long and intensive process, enriched by critical discourse. I hope that, in this exegesis, I shed light on the creative decisions I made, influenced by the frameworks I used.
CRITICAL FRAMEWORK
I started with a small book of Mansfield’s short stories that had once belonged to my maternal grandmother. It was here that I revisited one of my favourite stories, *Bliss*, in which Bertha Young is about to hold a dinner party. What struck me about this story was its effervescence, how Bertha is filled with a tremulous and bursting joy, how she fights with Nanny over her baby, how she admires the pear tree with Miss Fulton. “And the two women stood side by side looking at the slender, flowering tree. Although it was so still it seemed, like the flame of a candle, to stretch up, to point, to quiver in the bright air, to grow taller and taller as they gazed – almost to touch the rim of the round, silver moon” (Mansfield 1, 113). Bertha feels desire towards Miss Fulton and imagines it to be mutual. But then, as the guests are leaving the party, she realises that Miss Fulton and her husband are having an affair. That sense of beauty, that moment of bliss, is fragile and fleeting. I admired how Mansfield could establish this tableau and then deftly destroy it. I also loved how visual it was, how specific Mansfield had been in her physical detail, as if she were a painter as well as a writer.

I read Antony Alpers’ *The Life of Katherine Mansfield* next. Dr Gerri Kimber, a leading Mansfield scholar from the University of Northampton, recommended it to me as the definitive biography. We’d been in email communication ever since she discovered my Mansfield comics online, reprinting some in the Katherine Mansfield Society newsletter. Alpers published his first edition in 1953, and revised it over the years as more material came to light. As a New Zealand academic working in England, he’d been able to interview Mansfield’s husband and first biographer, John Middleton Murry. Although I admired how thorough his biography was, I was slightly put off by his avuncular, cozy tone, which seemed patronising. He is coy when it comes to her sexuality.
It was here that I noticed how relentless a biography could be, particularly in response to Mansfield’s peripatetic life. Soon all the dinner parties and house moves began to feel like an itinerary, and I longed to linger on specific episodes rather than jumping from one to the other.

Kathleen Jones’ *Katherine Mansfield* was a more satisfying reading experience. Told in the continuous present, this gives the impression that Katherine is still with us, alive at least on the pages. Structurally, Jones is more experimental than Alpers, beginning the biography with Mansfield’s final days at Fontainebleau, and interspersing Mansfield’s narrative with Murry’s. I was struck, in both biographies, by the shiny photographic inserts, and how often I turned to the photos, wishing that there were more of them for me to decipher.

I read Claire Tomalin’s *Katherine Mansfield: A Secret Life* next. It is shorter in page length, and written in lucid prose. As it was published in 1983, it doesn’t have the more recently discovered information of the later biographies, but she provides rich detail about Virginia Woolf and the Bloomsbury Group. It was at this point that I began to draw in earnest, visualising the scenes that Tomalin described.

Ida Baker wrote a memoir of her friendship with Katherine Mansfield, *The Memories of LM*. It is a curious document – evocative, but filled with a sense of unworthiness and deification of Mansfield. Baker idolises Mansfield, and excuses her for her cruelty. “Most of the belittling remarks Katherine made about me, generally in illness, and mostly from her letters to Murry which he published, were just a freeing of herself from a momentary vexation...the breaking point of her tolerance under stress of constant pain” (236). Although Baker undersells her own abilities, she writes very well. She describes how, despite being Mansfield’s constant companion, their friendship never blossomed – Baker was forever held back by her sense of inadequacy. “She wanted me to have a boat of my own, so that we could sail together, always at hand but independently. If only I could have been myself, had a boat of my own, and been happy in it, I could have done so much for her” (235). (fig. 2)
Ida Baker says that Katherine can’t really be described.

To suggest Katherine in words is rather like trying to catch a glint of light on a butterfly’s wing or describing the shading of a rose.

Deep, dark, steady eyes that really looked.

Sensitive, fine, curved mouth.

There was a bell-like quality in her rich, low, voice & her singing was a high, pure soprano.

Diagram of Katherine Mansfield, as told by Ida Baker.

She wasn’t tall nor short but so well-proportioned that one did not notice.

Born actress & mimic & even in her ordinary everyday life took censure from the company she was in.

That was why so many thought they were not just her friend, they were her only friend.

Footsteps of her personal possessions, KM could make any place a home.
CK Stead, another leading Mansfield scholar, wrote a novel called *Mansfield*. It focuses on the year 1915, when Mansfield’s brother, Leslie Beauchamp, joins the British army with the intention of going to war, and dies whilst demonstrating how to use a grenade. Rather than using Mansfield as the only voice, it switches between her, Leslie, and his friend, Fred Goodyear. Somehow the novel is a little flat – it doesn’t feel real enough, and the tension is diluted through the shifting point of view. Mansfield’s own words are paraphrased and don’t feel as sharp as the source material they’ve been drawn from. As Hermione Lee writes in *The Guardian*, “But, for all its author’s fine qualifications and its alluring subject, unfortunately Mansfield doesn’t come off” (Lee). I was impressed by Stead’s decision to choose a small section of her life and distil her entire existence into it. I wondered if I should be choosing a sliver myself, rather than trying to encompass her entire experience. I settled instead upon on a selection of slivers.

*Talking of Katherine Mansfield* is a one-woman play by Cathy Downes, performed at the 2013 *Going West* Festival. I liked how Downes interwove her own fascination with Mansfield with biographical detail, and I was particularly taken with her re-enactment of Mansfield’s story ‘Prelude’, and how Mansfield’s fiction dovetails into the facts of her life. I noted the adaptability of Mansfield’s prose – how it lends itself to drama as well as illustration, because Mansfield was paying just as much attention to how things sounded as to how things appeared.

I saw *Bliss: The Beginning of Katherine Mansfield*, a tele-movie by Fiona Samuel. As in other adaptations and dramatisations of Mansfield’s life, Samuel chose to focus on a particular section of Mansfield’s life: her early years, from the 1890s to the early 1910s. Samuel is successful in evoking Mansfield’s sharp-witted intellect and tongue, and I wondered if she had a similar process to mine, harvesting dialogue out of Mansfield’s letters and journals.

I read *Katherine Mansfield’s Notebooks*, edited by Margaret Scott. This was incredibly vivid but also jumbled, little scraps of her life mixed up with fiction and shopping lists. I was grateful for how specific Mansfield had been in describing her mood, her physical
surrounds, the objects around her, and sometimes the clothes that she wore. With careful attention, you could reconstruct an entire scene from her notes (fig. 3). It was the diaries, as well as the letters, that I would turn to again and again when drawing the scenes. Biographies and adaptations have been filtered by someone else’s sensibility and biases. Biographers make selections as to what information to highlight and what to ignore in the construction of a narrative, and in reading this journal, I got to make decisions as to what I should bring to light, according to my own agenda. It also felt as though the diaries and letters were the magnifying glass, paying close attention to the details in Mansfield’s life, whereas the biographies were the big picture – connecting the fragments, putting undated material into chronological order. I became obsessive about ensuring that the specifics were correct, finding references to furniture, clothing and speech, imagining a Mansfield scholar to be reading my work. It was also an effective method of close reading – Mansfield’s words became more than beautiful prose; they were instructions on how to draw her life.

The letters were interesting: the online version, found at the NZ Electronic Text Centre, were taken from Middleton Murry’s first edition, editing out the unsavoury things Mansfield had written to him. As Murry told Ottoline Morrell, “Now the only thing that matters to me is that she should have her rightful place as the most wonderful writer and the most beautiful spirit of our time” (Daroch 258). He similarly edited Mansfield’s journals, and upon reading them, Lytton Strachey remarked: “why that foul-mouthed, virulent, brazen-faced broomstick of a creature should have got herself up as a pad of rose-scented cotton wool is beyond me” (Holroyd). Again, this alerts me to the subjective nature of biography and how it is shaped by writer and his/her own sensibility. Murry’s agenda was to ensure Mansfield went down in history, and he succeeded. However he failed to recognise that her darkness was also compelling, or perhaps he was constrained by the cultural mores of the time. Lytton Strachey was a friend and associate of Mansfield’s, but she was peripheral to his social milieu, and his impression of her was more superficial than Murry’s.
fig. 3: drawing from descriptions in Mansfield’s journal
Turning to biographer extraordinaire, Janet Malcolm, I started with *The Silent Woman*, which was not so much a biography of Sylvia Plath as the examination of the biographical form. Malcolm investigated the approaches different biographers took: generally they sided with Plath, who killed herself in the midst of a messy separation, forever casting Ted Hughes as the villain. Malcolm revealed a lot about herself, including being seduced by Hughes’ sexy letters, feeling more sympathetic towards him than Sylvia, a contemporary who had attended the same college as Malcolm, and spending time at another Plath/Hughes biographer’s house, who forgot to put the white sauce in the lasagne she was making for Malcolm, and had been terrorised by Olwyn and Ted Hughes into publishing their approved version of the story. This reinforced to me how much a biography was also about the biographer and the relationships she or he has formed with the subject, and how stories were funnelled through personal relationships.

I then read *Two Lives: Gertrude and Alice*, which showed me that a biography need not be linear at all, that it can concentrate on certain parts of a life that are emblematic of the whole life, and be ordered thematically rather than chronologically. In this book, Malcolm returns again and again to Gertrude and Alice’s experiences as Jews in Nazi-occupied France, and how untouched they seemed to be by the experience. Malcolm fails to mention her own Eastern European Jewish refugee heritage, which is perhaps why she is so fascinated by Stein’s response, but you wonder why she doesn’t highlight this connection, when she includes so much of herself in her writing.

Another influential text was *Never Any End to Paris* by Enrique Vila-Matas, which began with the author entering an Ernest Hemingway look-alike competition, despite not resembling Hemingway. This book was about fashioning oneself in the image of one’s literary forefathers, a theme I was investigating; and the literary apprenticeship of emulating a famous writer’s life. In this case, Vila-Matas went to live in Marguerite Duras’ garret, as had Hemingway. He frequented Parisian cafés, talking of the novel he
was planning on writing as if it were already finished, and a work of staggering genius to boot. The novel inhabited the liminal space between fiction and memoir, using the author’s own name and biographical details in the story. Throughout the text there is a roll call of famous Parisian writers, including Barthes, who wrote: ‘The text is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture ... the writer can only imitate a gesture that is always anterior, never original. His only power is to mix writings, to counter the ones with the others, in such a way as never to rest on any one of them.’ (Allen 146–147)

Many New Zealand writers pay a huge debt to Mansfield – they imitate her gestures, mixing her techniques with their own ones, bringing her way of truly inhabiting the moment to contemporary New Zealand literature. But she is only one of many influences in a media-saturated world. Vila-Matas described a time when he imitated Hemingway and other great modernist writers as a way of learning to write, and also as a form of magical thinking – if he followed Hemingway’s footsteps precisely enough he too could become a literary great. I was thinking along similar lines as I tried to emulate Mansfield.

*U and I* by Nicholson Baker was a flagrantly inexpert, darkly funny biography of John Updike. I appreciated the irreverent approach, and the author’s early admission that he had only read a few of Updike’s novels, not all of them, but was obsessed with him. This freed me up from feeling as though I had to adopt the expertise of a literary scholar.

**Graphic memoirs and biographies**

Alison Bechdel’s *Fun Home* and *Are you My Mother* were hugely influential in the creation of my work. They interrogate the process by which an artist made. They use extensive archival material, refer to literary texts and use one person’s life to cast light on another’s. Elizabeth El Rafaie writes,

> Alison Bechdel’s *Fun Home*... is full of explicit allusions and more implicit references to feminist history, lesbian coming-out stories, and literary works, which play a central role in showing
Bechdel’s complicated love-hate relationship with her father…. While it is unnecessary to be familiar with every literary work referred to in Fun Home in order to enjoy the narrative, the full breath of intertextual meaning will only be available to the most well-read individuals, thus deepening their sense of involvement with the story and its protagonist. (216)

Fun Home is rich in intertextual detail, incorporating literature and film references, using a metaphor of Daedalus and Icarus, the ill-fated wax-winged escapees from Greek mythology. Bechdel has mined her repository of journals, photographs and letters, and has reproduced them, redrawing rather than photographing them, to help propel the narrative. Guided by Bechdel, I have redrawn documents found in the Mansfield archives, such as the telegram and letter announcing her brother’s death, and the letter she wrote to Princess Bibesco, telling her to back off her husband. I have also reproduced a page of my own journal (fig. 4) as a homage to Bechdel and have found her meticulous attention to detail in
reproducing her family home hugely influential, searching for photo references wherever possible when recreating scenes from Mansfield’s life. Bechdel famously dressed in her father’s clothes and took photographs of her poses before drawing them (Chute photo 5.7b), and although I haven’t taken those steps, I have constantly referred to the archive of Mansfield photographs in order to recreate her wardrobe, as well as *The Material Mansfield*, a photographic book of Mansfield’s ephemera. In doing this I have established the historicity of the Mansfield material, ensuring that I am starting from an accurate standpoint – that my facts are correct. But these historical artefacts have been filtered through my own hand – I have not merely placed the scanned photographs or letters into my graphic novel as some comics creators chose to do. This tells the viewer that Mansfield’s story has an intermediary – me – and her life is nuanced and interpreted by my own worldview. The drawing imbues a fictional aspect into her life, allowing me to manipulate fact, to take an existing static photograph and to animate it. Also, in transcribing Mansfield’s letters, I have enacted a process of ‘becoming’ Mansfield, as she describes in her letters to Dorothy Brett: “When I write about ducks I swear that I am a white duck with a round eye, floating in a pond fringed with yellow blobs and taking an occasional dart at the other duck with the round eye, which floats upside down beneath me.” (Murry (2) 83) Writing down her words forces me to imagine her emotional state when she wrote them, and also imbues the surrounding invented dialogue with a Mansfield sensibility by association.

Another influential thread in Bechdel’s *Fun Home* is her identification and disidentification with her father – constantly seeking points where they overlap and points where they diverge – and I have taken a similar approach when comparing Mansfield’s life with my own. Bechdel examines the similarities and differences between herself and her father for a number of reasons, trying to unpack the legacy of her upbringing. She is defining her identity, having grown up in an emotionally repressive environment, and looking for the points which turned her into an artist. A vital convergent/divergent aspect of Bechdel and her father’s identity is their sexuality: they are both gay, but whereas Bechdel’s father
felt compelled to hide this, Bechdel wanted to be as out as possible. Bechdel’s father is cloaked in an air of mystery – he has secrets – and Bechdel tries to unravel his motivations in *Fun Home*. She searches for clues in the books that he read, the photographs he left, and the projects that he undertook. She revisits the time before his death when he reveals that he too is gay. As she does this, her love and understanding for her father emerges, alongside more ambivalent feelings of loss and anger towards him.

In *Mansfield and Me* I have used our points of convergence as the places where I tell the story. There is much of Mansfield’s life and my own that I have not included, partly because of the constraints of the medium, and partly because they do not prompt a strong feeling of identification or disidentification in me. In setting up my quest to become a writer like Mansfield, I come to the conclusion that I am nothing like Mansfield, even though we share the same artistic longing, restlessness and sexuality. Although it is not explicit in the text, I have used my own experience with chronic illness as a way into understanding Mansfield’s experience with tuberculosis, but, like Bechdel, I am the product of a more enlightened era – in Bechdel’s case, a more accepting view of queerness, in my own, the advance of modern medicine.

*Are You My Mother* mines texts, notably child psychologist Donald Winnicott’s writings, and Virginia Woolf’s *To The Lighthouse*. This book uses literary foundations to explore the relationship Bechdel has with her mother, and re-enacts Virginia’s life, just as documentaries create historical re-enactments.

Aesthetically, Bechdel’s linework and her use of ink washes appealed to me, lending the tight drawings a looser, organic feeling. She works in a six-panel grid, which she often disrupts with full-page images. Bechdel’s approach appears traditional, influenced by Hergé. Her figures are not overly-stylised – there are no humans as cats, nor do they have disproportionately large heads or 3-fingered hands – and there is enough environmental detail in the panels to give the impression of realness. The quiet layout of the pages means that more attention is paid to the text, signifying that this is an internal sort of drama, not the bombastic,
action-packed kind found in Marvel or DC comics. I too have a representational way of drawing, paying close attention to the proportions of things, but try as I might, my drawing skills have limitations and I do not have the precision of masters like Bechdel, Daniel Clowes or Adrian Tomine. Although I experimented earlier with a manga-influenced version of Mansfield (fig. 5), I decided to draw the way that came most naturally to me, sympathetic to the autobiographical medium. Also, like Bechdel, my comics were text-heavy and the layout had to accommodate narration as well as dialogue, so a simpler layout supported this.
Art Spiegelman’s *Maus I & II* are seminal examples of the graphic memoir genre and are name-checked in nearly every academic text discussing comics. Spiegelman employs intertextuality by inserting comics within comics. He also plays with a fictional device – casting the Nazis and cats and the Jews as mice – in order to convey a truth. Although this is a harrowing story, it is also one of resilience and survival against the odds. His decision to use mice and cats is a clever one – not only is it loaded with symbolism, it also heightens the pathos and emotion through the act of simplifying the faces. As Scott McCloud writes, “When we abstract an image through cartooning we’re not so much eliminating details as we are focusing on specific details. By stripping down an image to its essential “meaning”, an artist can amplify meaning in a way that realistic art can’t” (30). I was influenced by how Spiegelman juxtaposed his own story against his father’s – one of relative privilege in relation to his father’s experience in the Holocaust – and used this approach in my own work, putting my own modest story of writerly ambition against Mansfield’s far more dramatic and traumatic one, trying to determine how her own experience coloured mine, just as Spiegelman grappled with the legacy of having a Holocaust-surviving father, and a mother who committed suicide because of it.

Marjane Satrapi’s *Persepolis* and *Persepolis 2* combine a “visual simplicity...with emotional and political complexity” (Chute 137). Her style references Persian miniatures with their quality of being “shadowless and almost flat” (Chute 145). Using this visual language, Satrapi conveys the horror of the Islamic revolution and the Iran-Iraq war as she experienced it, growing up in Iran. As a reader I engaged with her story more strongly than I had engaged with previous reportage about the subject, because of the clarity, particularity and intimacy in its telling. The Islamic revolution was no longer an abstract subject – it had been personified by Satrapi. With this insight, I set about conveying Mansfield’s biography in comic form, imagining a new audience for her story, one that might avoid extensive biographies, or twentieth-century literature. I viewed the past as something unfamiliar to be personified, providing a bridge between now and then, one way of living and another, as Satrapi had done with 1970s and 1980s Iran.
In *Dotter of Her Father’s Eyes* Mary and Bryan Talbot interweave three timelines: a continuous present, the 1920s era of Lucia Joyce, and the sixties and seventies when Mary Talbot was growing up. Each time period is distinguished by colour palette: the present is in full colour, Lucia Joyce’s story is in blue duotones and Mary Talbot’s past is in sepia tones. The end sheets are decorated with archival material, photographed rather than drawn. This approach means that it is immediately obvious whose story is being told, and influenced me when I was making decisions as to how to colour my comic. I too decided to make my contemporary story full-colour and Mansfield’s story monotone to signify to the viewer which part of the story they were in.

Mary Talbot, the writer, has a number of other strategies in order to knit the story together: Talbot has a tyrannical Joycean scholar father, and Lucia Joyce’s own famous father is a difficult man. Both Mary and Lucia struggle to forge their own identity in the shadow of forceful personalities. This signposted a route for me in trying to merge two distinct lives together.

Dylan Horrocks’ *Hicksville* provided valuable clues: not only is his evocation of a utopian comics community in East Coast New Zealand very seductive, he also uses intertextuality, nesting comics within comics that shed meaning on each other. He juxtaposes multiple story lines: a comics creation myth, starring Captain Cook and Hone Heke, the story of Leonard Batts, comics reporter, Sam Zabel, a disillusioned comics artist, and Moxie and Toxie, the comic that Sam Zabel writes. Horrocks embodies intertextuality in *The Magic Pen*, in which Sam Zabel enters into pulp comics by blowing on the pages, and proceeds to reel through the genres, unable to fully indulge in fantasy comics’ pleasures because of his moral responsibilities from the real world. Using the same protagonist – or alter-ego – creates an intertextual connection with *Hicksville*, even though both books are self-contained. I turned to Horrocks’ work as I nested fragments of Mansfield’s short stories within my own narrative, looking for clues as to how to differentiate the fragments from the main narrative. I was also hugely inspired by Horrocks as New Zealand’s leading cartoonist, who placed New Zealand comics on an international stage.
New Yorker cartoonist Roz Chast wrote a graphic memoir, *Can’t We Talk About Something More Pleasant?*, about the decline and death of her parents. This combines her trademark scratchily-inked, watercoloured comics with photographs and passages of handwritten text. The use of photography is interesting – they lend the work an air of veracity and documentary proof. As Elizabeth El Refaie writes:

> The photograph...plays the most significant role in performing authenticity in the graphic memoir genre. When Kress and van Leeuwen say that we still define naturalistic modality on the basis of the standard 35mm color photograph, they seem to suggest that it is the photograph’s high degree of iconic resemblance to its objects of representation that makes it appear so exceptionally authentic (159).

Ros Chast’s story is about aging, difficult parents, and her style is not slick but it is authentically her own, and is very moving in its intimacy and honesty in exploring difficult mother-daughter relationships. This emboldened me as I told my own ordinary story in my own style, with my own less-than-noble disclosures.

Searching for visual inspiration, I turned to other graphic novels. I fell in love with the watercolours in Judith Vanistendael’s *When David Lost His Voice* (fig.6), and her cinematic approach to storytelling, showing passages in images rather than telling with words. I looked more for opportunities to use a cinematic style of storytelling, realising that panels without words had an emotional clout that infused the surrounding word-filled panels. I was inspired by Vanessa Davis’ joyful, funny confessional comics that, like mine, used watercolour as a medium and celebrated the voice of a young woman, (fig.7) and I turned to Brecht Evans and his anarchic use of ink when it came time to draw the flowers that appeared so frequently in Mansfield’s narrative. (fig.8)
fig.6: Judith Vanistendael, from *When David Lost His Voice*
I was probably setting myself up, with this Israeli guy that I met at my friends’ annual squash dance party.

Jewish American girls and Israeli guys—isn’t that our REAL birthright?

I found him insufferably charming. He was strangely familiar.

Just so you know, this is just for tonight.

No kidding!

Against his better judgement (as he continually reminded me), we met for a drink at a bar in the Lower East Side. He greeted me with a surprise.

Hey, look what I’ve got!

Prince tickets.

Yep, I’m taking my best friend, Tomer, to see PRINCE.

Pretty cool.

fig.7: Vanessa Davis, from Make Me A Woman
fig.8: Brecht Evans, from The Making Of
Kate Beaton was another point of reference. Her handling of historical figures is liberating. They speak like twenty-first-century people, and have recognisable contemporary motives for their actions. As a result of their anachronistic behaviour, they seem more relatable and hilarious. Her comic highlights that we normally treat historical characters with an earnestness that hides their true characters, and having them talk in a contemporary colloquial manner breaks down a barrier – they seem more like ‘us’ than ‘them’. The past is another country, but Beaton invites them to ours. Beaton’s drawings are loose and expressive, and somewhat anarchic. Their spontaneous air lends her work a lot of vibrancy and energy. (fig.9) This prompted me to treat Mansfield with less reverence, drawing her closer to me, and also, on occasion, make her say anachronistic things, hoping to achieve the same effect that Beaton had achieved, that of making them seem like someone we might know and want to hang out with.
Critical Texts

I started with Hillary L. Chute’s book, *Graphic Women*. Chute is a respected comics academic who, noting the exclusion of women in contemporary critical discussion, focussed her research on five significant comics creators: Aline Kominsky-Crumb, Phoebe Gloeckner, Lynda Barry, Marjane Satrapi and Alison Bechdel. In each of these profiles, she provides a close reading of their work, discussing the role of “autofictionalography” in relation to Lynda Barry’s work, trauma in relation to Phoebe Gloeckner’s comics, how handwriting underscores “the subjective positionality of the author” (11), and how the works are rigorously handmade. She discusses how Marjane Satrapi envisioned a child’s life within the shifting geography of 1970s Tehran.

I then read Nancy K. Miller’s *But Enough About Me: Why We Read Other People’s Lives*. I was struck by her observation: “Another text can give you back your life. Memoir reading works like a kind of interactive remembering – where the screen prompts the construction of memory itself.” I bore this in mind as I read Mansfield’s life, finding my own overlapping experiences as I read about hers. There were also points in Mansfield’s life that felt very alien to me, and Nancy K. Miller describes this phenomenon too: “Disidentification turns out to be as important in the self-reconstructive effect of memoir reading as identification” (11). Turning to Roland Barthes, I chose *Mythologies* and was delighted to have all that I’d learnt as a corporate graphic designer described to me, as Barthes decoded popular advertising from the 1950s, elucidating the messages submerged in the imagery. It prompted me to examine what was contained within my comics, and what role each object played. I paid particular attention to posters on the walls of my 90s flats, making broader references to film and music culture of the time, adding to the characterisation. In figure 10, I place *Betty Blue* and *A Clockwork Orange* posters on the wall to amplify the character’s air of danger and craziness. The story crosses many international borders and I use architecture, fashion and décor to communicate the different environments and time.

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3 Lynda Barry’s invented term to indicate the space between fiction and non-fiction where autobiographical comics sit.
periods. Also, later in my own narrative, I tell a secondary story of parenthood that simmers below the one of becoming a writer. This is a story that the viewer could subconsciously absorb whilst reading the primary narrative. Alison Bechdel does a similar thing in *Fun Home*: although the work is explicitly about her father, a story about her mother is told in the back of panels, through body language and snippets of dialogue.
Graham Allen’s *Intertextuality* provided a clear, incisive analysis of the critical framework, explaining the ideas behind Kristeva, Saussure, and Bakhtin, and discussing Bloom, a critic most conspicuously dedicated to intertextuality. Bloom claims that authors – poets in particular – grapple with conflicting impulses to imitate the texts that have gone before, and to create something original (134). Allen’s text provided an excellent elucidation of many complex ideas, and gave me clues as to where to look next for further research.

Allen led on to Kristeva, one of the founding theorists in intertextuality. Although her prose is dense and sometimes deliberately obtuse, she had many interesting observations. She wrote, “The only way a writer can participate in history is by transgressing this abstraction through a process of reading-writing; that is, through the practice of a signifying structure in relation or opposition to another structure. History and morality are written and read within the infrastructure of texts” (65). This described to me the process that I was undertaking, in meshing my own story with Mansfield’s. I also felt it was significant because by drawing her life I was engaging in her writings more deeply, forced to visualise everything rather than scanning for general meaning. I noticed the biases of the different biographers I’d read, from the extremely prim Isabel C Clarke, who wrote a 1944 biography, imagining all of Mansfield’s transgressions to be a result of Bad London Influences, to avuncular Alpers, to the more morally contemporary Jones. Mansfield’s life had gained a particular structure due to its telling and retelling by biographers, playwrights, artists and writers – her life was an edifice. I needed to build my own life up in order to see how it compared with hers, and how the myth of the writer was formed. Also, context is everything – Mansfield may have appeared like a punk to Richard Murry, her brother-in-law (as told anecdotally to me by Vincent O’Sullivan), but such nuances are lost in a time when it’s no longer shocking to wear lipstick. Another structure I set up in relation to Mansfield’s was the current cultural climate. One wonders what kind of writer Mansfield would be if she were born in 1988 rather than in 1888.
*Critical Inquiry: Comics and Media*, edited by Hillary Chute and Patrick Jagoda, provided a number of observations about the comics medium, mainly through the form of interviews with practitioners. Although this didn’t discuss theory explicitly, it was fascinating to read about practitioners’ processes and thoughts around comics.

*Alternative Comics: An Emerging Literature* by Charles Hatfield described the relationship between the person drawing and writing the story and the character within the story in an illuminating way, “The worldview of the autobiographical subject, often a confused young naif, contrasts with the more mature and comprehensive, or simply more jaded, view of the author” (128).

Hatfield was suggesting that the past self becomes a character of sorts, distinct from the author of the book, who has the critical faculties that the younger self does not. This influenced my own thinking about my book – I, the author, have selected scenes from my life to make a cohesive narrative about becoming a writer, a narrative that I was unaware of when I was younger. On the flip side, I have also made all of my bumbling naïve mistakes seem somehow deliberate, coalescing into a narrative arc.

Elisabeth El Refaie’s *Autobiographical Comics: Life Writing in Pictures* proved to be invaluable, covering subjects such as marginality, picturing embodied selves, healthy and diseased bodies, how time works in comics and performing authenticity. I took copious notes, sure that they would be useful in forming my critical framework.

Scott McCloud’s *Understanding Comics* is a frequently cited text, drawing on Will Eisner’s *Comics & Sequential Art* as a starting point. It’s striking in that the entire message is communicated in comics form, explaining concepts such as time, characterisation, and the function of the gutters between panels.

Overall, these books informed and influenced me as I set about writing *Mansfield and Me*. Traditionally a novel reader, I found myself reading memoirs, graphic and prose, not discussed in this document, searching for ways to write my own life.
The act of reading, theorists claim, plunges us into a network of textual relations. To interpret a text, to discover its meaning, or meanings, is to trace those relations. Reading thus becomes a process of moving between texts. Meaning becomes something which exists between a text and all the other texts to which it refers and relates, moving out from the independent text into a network of textual relations. The text becomes the intertext. (Allen 1)

In creating my graphic novel, *Mansfield and Me*, I have been engaged in an exercise of intertextuality. Tracing links between Mansfield’s stories, diaries and letters, alongside biographies, literary criticism and letters and biographies of her contemporaries, I have recreated episodes from her life that are rich in intertextual detail. I have had to examine how her stories have influenced my own life, illustrating scenes from them in an act of literary translation. I have introduced contemporary cultural influences, making use of Morrissey, who, like Mansfield, revered Oscar Wilde. When creating Mansfield’s dialogue I’ve had to choose whether I directly quote her diaries, adapt her letters or invent what she might have said. It would take a particularly attuned reader to decipher the sources of the dialogue, and the text acts as a love letter to the Mansfield fanatics who have memorised her diaries. I’ve viewed my own life and work as a story to mesh with Mansfield’s, deliberately searching for entry points in either her biography or her prose, because Mansfield has the archetypal writer’s life, the one that New Zealand writers feel they must measure up against. She is a parental figure of sorts, the mother of the modern short story, and we look to her just as painters look to Frances Hodgkins or Colin McCahon.
As discussed in the literature review section of this exegesis, I have taken cues from other graphic novelists, Alison Bechdel in particular. On page 11 of Alison Bechdel’s *Fun Home* (fig.11), there are a number of intertextual elements at play. First, we are within a memoir and its incumbent parameters: the fact that a memoir is not quite as precise as an autobiography; it’s less linear, more impressionistic, more subject to the wiles of fiction. The mystery of Bechdel’s school teacher/funeral director father is being unravelled, focusing on his coming out story. Bechdel draws a portrait of him as a perfectionist home decorator, a non-traditional role for a man in the 1960s. Allen says, “contemporary literature seems concerned with echoing and playing with previous stories, classic texts and long-established genres such as the romance and the detective story” (5), and we hear the echoes of stories gone by in *Fun Home*. Stories are how we make sense of our lives, and are told to us when we are small children, unaware of the dangers in the world. Stories are a shorthand for a raft of human experiences, meaning that the writer does not need to explicitly tell them – she can allude to them, and rely on the reader’s prior knowledge.

Bechdel is specific about the references that she is drawing on. *It’s a Wonderful Life* is on the television, a movie starring Jimmy Stewart about a man who is planning on committing suicide on Christmas eve, but is stopped by his guardian angel. Since Bechdel’s father ultimately commits suicide, this is a foreshadowing device. Also, she uses the Greek myth about Icarus and Daedalus as a motif. Daedalus, an architect and inventor, was imprisoned in Crete for throwing his nephew off the Acropolis in a fit of jealousy. He had a son, Icarus, and in order to escape Crete he constructed wings from wax and feathers. He warned Icarus not to fly too high but Icarus was too excited by the thrill of flying, and sun melted the wax, and he drowned in the ocean. ‘Daedalus too, was indifferent to the human cost of his projects’, writes Bechdel, and here Bechdel is referring to her father’s all-consuming obsession with how the house looked, a passion that came at the expense of his children.
BUT IN THE MOVIE WHEN JIMMY STEWART COMES HOME ONE NIGHT AND STARTS YELLING AT EVERYONE...

HE BLITHELY BETRAYED THE KING, FOR EXAMPLE, WHEN THE QUEEN ASKED HIM TO BUILD HER A COW DISGUISE SO SHE COULD SEDUCE THE WHITE BULL.

...IT'S OUT OF THE ORDINARY.

THE NEEDLES ARE SHARP!

GODDAMN IT!

YOU PLAY IT OVER AND OVER—NOW STOP IT! STOP IT!

DAEDALUS, TOO, WAS INDIFFERENT TO THE HUMAN COST OF HIS PROJECTS.

DON'T HIT ME!

GEORGE, WHY MUST YOU TORTURE THE CHILDREN?

KUH-CLINK!

fig.11: Fun Home p 11
Authors do not create their texts from their own original minds, but rather compile them from pre-existent texts, so that, as Kristeva writes, a text is ‘a permutation of texts, an intertextuality in the space of a given text’, in which ‘several utterances, taken from other texts, intersect and neutralize one another. (Allen 36)

In this excerpt from Alison Bechdel’s *Fun Home* (fig.12), there are multiple layers of intertextuality, including references to F Scott Fitzgerald's books and carefully reproduced examples of Bechdel’s father’s letters to her mother. Bechdel suggests that her
father saw similarities in his life and Fitzgerald’s, and must have identified with Jay Gatsby, the archetypal self-made man, seeking acceptance in high society, although he didn’t acknowledge it. Bechdel’s father had come from modest beginnings but had built a lavish mansion around himself in the restoration of their Gothic revival house: “Gatsby’s self-willed metamorphosis from farm boy to prince is in many ways identical to my father’s.” (Bechdel 63).

Fitzgerald shared Bechdel’s father’s self-destructive qualities, having been an alcoholic since the age of 20. He brought with him the notion of the Great American Writer, as well as the reckless excess of the Paris Jazz age and the glamour of the Hollywood years. Fitzgerald is something of a thwarted figure, his brilliant literary career compromised by his mentally unstable wife, Zelda, and his alcoholism. Bechdel’s father is also thwarted: he’s secretly gay, and bound to his small town funeral director duties, rather than living in a city like New York or Paris where he may have been able to live openly. He may have harboured literary ambitions, but he ended up as a schoolteacher, a distant father and an undertaker. Still, Bechdel sees her father as glamorous – he has secrets, he loves literature, he has grand ambitions – and pairing him with Gatsby gives him a lustre, a grand tragic narrative that he might otherwise have been denied. As Adrienne Mitchell writes:

By casting her father in various mythic, symbolic, and literary roles ... Bechdel re-animates him, allows the dead man’s spirit imaginary landscapes to inhabit: “The goal of spectral thinking is thus not to immure but to allow to return, to be visited by a demand, a demand to mourn and a demand to organize. Mourning is, in an important way, the work of history” (Freccero 196).

There is another narrative going on: that of the love letter. Although this is a very intimate document for Bechdel to be sharing with us, it is, as Kristeva describes, intersected and neutralised by the notion that her father is channelling Fitzgerald. This lends the letter an air of performativeness and artifice. As a reader engaged in a biography project, I am reminded of Mansfield’s letters, and her sense that many of them were bright
and false, a manifestation of her protective mask. Artifice is one of Bechdel’s central concerns, what with her parents performing a marriage, as well as acting on stage as part of the local theatre troupe. Bechdel’s father, in restoring his house, is constructing an environment at odds with their 1960s existence – a simulacrum of the perfect family, whose reality does not match expectations. What Bechdel is at pains to do is to show what lies beneath the artifice, and the effects that living a lie has – she has tried to be as honest as possible in her work, revealing her oddness and obsessive compulsive disorder as a child. I have taken cues from that, driven by my need to give an honest portrait of myself. I have also tried to show what lay beneath Mansfield’s mask – her secret thoughts as revealed in private moment and thought bubbles – so that both the interior and the exterior can be viewed. This is something the graphic novel medium is well-suited to do.

*Intertextuality in relation to ‘Mansfield and Me’*

Chapter 11 is titled *If I can make it here*, a nod to the song ‘New York New York’, composed for a Scorsese movie and made famous by Frank Sinatra. As Graham Allen writes,

> Intertextuality seems such a useful term because it foregrounds notions of relationality, interconnectedness and interdependence in modern cultural life. In the Postmodern epoch, theorists often claim, it is not possible any longer to speak of originality or the uniqueness of the artistic object, be it a painting or a novel, since every artistic object is so clearly assembled from bits and pieces of already existent art. (5)

Nowhere is this more evident than in a story about moving to New York City. There is a never-ending supply of New York City stories, perhaps because New York is one of the world’s centres of media and publishing. Kim Gordon described her move to Manhattan in 1980 in *Girl In A Band*, “Now that I no longer live in New York, I don’t know if I could ever move back. All that young-girl idealism is someone else’s now. That city I know doesn’t exist anymore and it’s more alive in my head than it is when I’m there” (11).
As a child, I remember Casey Kasem talking of Cyndy Lauper’s own arrival, with only $10 and a packet of Marlboros in her pocket. Of course she only crossed the bridge from Queens but at the time it seemed fearless and drastic. Age 11, I saw Desperately Seeking Susan, fuelling my desire to go and live the New York life I was meant to be living, not the pale imitation on the other side of the planet.

More recently, narratives have been constructed around the 9/11 terrorist attacks, and Kim Gordon talks of her own shell-shocked experience, hosting musicians in her Lafayette Street apartment who were too terrified to go home by themselves. So as I created my own 9/11 story I was conscious of not needing to tell too much, as my story would feed into a network of textual relations. (fig. 13)

In creating Mansfield and Me, I was making intertextual connections with my fiction too. My first published novel, Dead People’s Music, described the experience of moving to New York City from the perspective of a young musician. I’d drawn a 53-page comic about being pregnant there with my son which I’d published on my blog. I had to restrain myself from trying to tell the full story as that would get in the way of the larger narrative. “As [Bloom] writes in Kabbalah and Criticism: ‘A single text has only part of a meaning; it is itself a synecdoche for a larger whole including other texts. A text is a relational event, and not a substance to be analysed’ ” (Allen 133).

There are multiple instances in my NYC narrative that allude to other stories: the pregnancy test is a trope that I almost avoided but found necessary to the advancement of the story. Jonathan’s character is wearing an anti-Iraq-war T-shirt in a number of the panels, alluding to the larger political situation of the time – Bush and Blair’s insistence at invading Iraq because of the spectral Weapons of Mass Destruction. I also take a call outside Chelsea Hotel, home to many cultural icons – Jack Kerouac, William Burroughs, Patti Smith, Gore Vidal, Dylan Thomas. It’s where Sid stabbed Nancy, it’s where Patti Smith and Robert Mapplethorpe hung out, it’s where Leonard Cohen and Janis Joplin conducted their affair. It’s a veritable Scheherazade of a place, a palimpsest of
An American who I'd met in New Zealand hooked up with a place to live in Park Slope, Brooklyn, with an ex-high school friend of his. Laura was also a graphic designer, but she'd lost her job in the dot com bust. We took a car service to her apartment, and I felt like I was in a movie.

The room we were meant to be renting wasn't empty yet.

Dan'd been working as a web writer near the towers when the planes hit. He'd seen the people jumping.

Laura had been on her way to midtown and she had to walk home, a trip that took her hours, and shredded her feet.

fig. 13: moving to New York City post 9/11.
stories that is constantly referred to in songs, photographs, movies, memoirs and novels.

This is a deliberate attempt to tap into larger stories, to have them swarming outside my smaller one, but it’s also a few blocks from the office I worked at when I fell pregnant. As Allen writes, “The text’s appearance of unity and independent existence is, in fact, part of its momentary arrangement of words and utterances which have complex social significance ‘outside’ the text in question” (36).

In the Mansfield section of _Mansfield and Me_ there is a different library of stories to tap into. Mansfield’s story is set in dramatic times – the fin de siècle, the birth of modernism, World War I – and she lived in a time when European New Zealand still viewed itself as part of the British Empire, yet to forge an identity of its own. It’s also a time more ephemeral and permanent than our own: whilst there are limited photographs to look at, letters were religiously written and kept, often detailing the writer’s private thoughts. In recreating Mansfield’s life, I took scenes from existing photographs, integrating them with passages from Mansfield’s letters and diaries (fig. 14). This is a manifestation of Kristeva’s reading-writing – drawing what I have read, to tease it into another story that has a direct relationship with my own. I use her story to gauge how much of a ‘real writer’ I am, and establish whether one has to leave one’s country to write. I suggest intertextual connections between my life and Mansfield’s where none existed before. I move to a new city: she too moves to a new city. I begin a new frenzied period of writing heightened by my pregnancy; she writes in an enhanced state thanks to fever and a pressing sense of mortality.
fig. 14: Using photos of Mansfield from the Alexander Turnbull Library to create scenes in Mansfield and Me
The Oscar Wilde dream (fig. 15), as described in Mansfield’s journal, is rich with both Freudian and intertextual allusions. Mansfield is ushered in to meet Oscar Wilde by Mark Gertler, a Bloombury painter, and Wilde is wearing his famous shabby green coat. He comes to visit her in her childhood home, accompanied by Ottoline Morrell. There he laments his time in prison, and how he could not remember the name of a particular pastry. Mansfield provides it to him – *milles feuilles*. I love that Mansfield is a fan and she meets – at least in her dreams – the person that she so admires – not only because of his writing but also because of his sexuality. As Sydney Janet Kaplan says in *Katherine Mansfield and the Origins of Modernist Fiction*:

> For Katherine Mansfield, Oscar Wilde was not a mere adolescent obsession, as some of her critics—and her husband—had too readily assumed, but rather a continuing model and terror, her impetus toward the idolization of art as a means of controlling the forbidden while allowing it, nonetheless, oblique expression. (35)

Mansfield’s dream of Oscar Wilde is rich with surrealist, *Alice in Wonderland* imagery. The *mille feuilles* pastry translates as a thousand pages – perhaps a 1001 nights reference – and contains something scarlet, possibly sexual inside it. Perhaps it represents the books and pages floating in front of Wilde, just out of his reach. Wilde’s appearance evokes his stories: *The Picture of Dorian Gray, The Selfish Giant, The Happy Prince*, and his snappy epigrams. It conjures the French wallpaper he banished as he lay dying, something that Mansfield rails against whilst staying in a series of French hotels. Mansfield’s own writing is laden with references to Wilde’s, from his frequent appearance in her journals to the way that she writes. As Kaplan quotes Vincent O’Sullivan:

> Wilde’s presence she left behind, but his traces will be in her work for the rest of her life. Her way of describing flowers, for instance; her precision in parodying the language of aesthetes; the brittleness of much of the conversation in her fiction; those inversions which are a mark of her style always. (33)
fig. 15: Mansfield’s Oscar Wilde dream, as described in a letter to Murry, November 1, 1920
I have nested Oscar Wilde within my own story through Morrissey references— in one of the posters on the wall Morrissey holds a Wilde book, connective tissue between texts (fig. 16). And Morrissey is my own personal Wilde, occupying that same transgressive and poetic space that Wilde did. Like Wilde, Morrissey's sexuality is ambiguous, and he eschewed the pop formula of writing about falling in and out of love, instead describing darker and more singular subjects— back scrubbers, shoplifters, moors murderers. Morrissey satirises contemporary society, as did Wilde so famously in *The Importance of Being Earnest*. Wilde paid attention to what flowers looked and smelled like; Morrissey wore gladioli in his back pocket, and his fans threw them at him when he climbed on stage. Wilde was 34 years older than Mansfield and Morrissey is fourteen years older than me— they both provided a role model as to how to be an artist.

fig. 16: Morrissey poses with an Oscar Wilde book.
Other texts provide a valuable support structure as I draw Mansfield’s biography.

As Goddard... argues, in such cases “the second text doesn’t have to work so hard – it can take for granted that the original text has left a trace which it can use to its advantage.” Readers, however, have to work particularly hard in order to recognize what is being alluded to and then use their knowledge of the original text to understand its meaning and relevance in the new context. (El Refaie 216)

I have made my decisions to exclude sections of Mansfield’s life with the knowledge that accounts of it exist in many other existing texts; I also hope that the reader will seek out the stories I have referred to and excerpted in my telling. My graphic novel does not exist alone – it’s a dew-laden strand on a giant web of Mansfield material. I imagine, however, there will be two different reading experiences of Mansfield and Me: one by the aficionado, who is familiar already with Mansfield’s story and biography, and one by the newcomer, who has no previous knowledge of Katherine Mansfield. Bearing that in mind, I have written it as a stand-alone text that does not rely on prior knowledge.

Mansfield newbies may instead be familiar with the comics medium. El Rafaie notes, “intertextuality describes the way in which the meanings by any one text are determined partly by the meanings of another text to which it appears similar” (216). This means that my graphic memoir will be read in the context of comics as a whole, and people’s relationship with them. This will vary hugely – from people who’ve relegated comics to childhood, to people who have kept up with all the latest indie imports.

Graphic novels sit in the fringes of conventional bookshops, still suffering somewhat from Fredric Wertham’s mid-fifties claim that comics were mind-rotting and should be banned (Kinnaird 42). People’s experiences of comics are often limited to Tintin, Garfield and Peanuts, and some readers of literary fiction claim to not be able to read words and pictures at the same time. It takes a certain kind of visual literacy. But given that this is a literary subject matter, I am hoping that my book might appeal to a non-
comics audience, the same one that made an exception for Alison Bechdel and Marjane Satrapi. Mansfield was interdisciplinary in her influences, turning to art, theatre, music and dance for cues as to how to write her short stories. She was influenced by impressionism and fauvism, incorporating colour, rhythm and light into her work so it almost seemed to rise up from the page as a painting: “Impressionism influenced and inspired Mansfield’s painterly writing style” (Reimer 2010). Because of this very visual, painterly style, her writing easily translates into images. She embraced contemporary painting and Japonisme and one would like to imagine that she’d be a comics fan too. Mansfield was a fashion icon, immortalised by DH Lawrence (Jones 271), particularly noted for her scarlet tights, a detail which made her come alive in my mind.

For readers familiar with the graphic novel medium, they could place my work within the realms of indie comics, as exemplified by Drawn and Quarterly and Fantagraphic Books. These publishers eschew the superhero genre, unless the work is a subversion of it. They could trace a line back through autobiographical comics, starting with Justin Brown’s *Binky Brown Meets the Holy Virgin Mary* and Spiegelman’s *Maus*, and join it up with the cluster of graphic memoirs published now. They could also find paralels in artist graphic biographies, such as Birmant and Oubrerie’s *Pablo* and Muller and Bocquet’s *Kiki de Montparnasse*. They’d recognise the gesture in the Talbots’ *Dotter of My Father’s Eye*, and perhaps note that Bechdel also introduces Virginia Wolf in *Are You My Mother?* All of these works share the desire to understand the human who created a particular artwork, and, in the case of a graphic novel, of trying to reanimate them – to bring them back to life on the page.
Many of the most prominent graphic novels have a strong autobiographical bent. Art Spiegelman’s Maus, Alison Bechdel’s Fun Home and Marjane Satrapi’s Persepolis all fit that bill. More recently, Mary and Bryan Talbot’s Dotter of Her Father’s Eyes explores Mary Talbot’s story as the daughter of a difficult Joycian scholar alongside the biography of Lucia Joyce. As Alison Bechdel says, “I always felt like there was something inherently autobiographical about cartooning, and that’s why there was so much of it….It does feel like it demands people to write autobiographies” (Chute 10).

Art Spiegelman also considers why comics lend themselves to autobiography: “It’s more intimate than a book of prose that’s set in type...The quirks of penmanship that make up comics have a much more immediate bridge to somebody... You’re getting an incredible amount of information about the maker” (Chute 10).

Perhaps this is because it is a hand-written, hand-drawn artefact and there is none of the anonymity of Times New Roman in MS Word to hide behind. Each person’s handwriting is distinctly their own and recognisable. As Chute says, “what feels so intimate about comics is that it looks like what it is; handwriting is an irreducible part of its instantiation.” (Chute 11). The very act of writing and drawing something on paper reminds us of the diary impulse, and our need to divulge our intimate details on paper.

When Alison Bechdel set out to tell the story of her father, she ended up telling her own story: “[the book’s] real story is about becoming an artist” (Chute, 176). The act of writing insists upon a pattern-finding, and writing memoir is a tool to explain how past events lead up to your current incarnation. El Rafaie writes:

All forms of life writing – including journals, where the events recounted tend to be closer in time to their actual occurrence
– entail a degree of reinterpretation and reconfiguration of the past through the filter of memory. Autobiography also invites individuals to relate past experiences to their present circumstances and imagined futures. (98)

Did Alison Bechdel know that she was going to become an artist when she was a child? The book seems to be more overtly about queerness, how she was “Spartan to my father’s Athenian. . . butch to his nelly” [15] However, the documentation of her obsessive diary-keeping and observational skills points to the artist’s impulse of transforming the banal into the sublime. As Dan McAdams writes:

> Autobiographical memories are encoded and retrieved in ways that serve the goals of the current working self. As such, current goals influence how autobiographical information is absorbed and organized in the first place, and goals generate retrieval models to guide the search process later on. (103)

Bechdel, as a queer artist, has selected her memories based on her perception of herself at the time of writing.

Underground comics have a long tradition of autobiography, as exemplified by Robert Crumb. Famous for *Fritz the Cat* and his obsession with Amazonian women, depicting himself as a tiny man clinging to their backs, he set the tone for a wave of comix, the ‘x’ signifying their R18 content.

A significant autobiographical comic was Justin Green’s *Binky Brown meets the Holy Virgin*, published in 1971, inspiring Art Spiegelman and Phoebe Gloeckner, amongst many others. Chute credits Green with “creating the autobiographical genre of comics that has become the dominant mode of contemporary work” (17). These works formed a blueprint for future comics, commonly including “taboo-breaking subject matter, subversive humour and irony” (El Rafaie 4).

Sexual explicitness is a recurring feature of autobiographical comics. Justin Brown’s Binky has penis rays, and Aline Kominsky Crumb will often illustrate her vagina, or going to the toilet. Alison
Bechdel includes lesbian sex scenes as a political act, providing an alternative narrative to the heteronormative one. “I felt that to a certain extent [my father] killed himself because he couldn’t come out, so I was determined to be utterly and completely out in my own life” (Chute 177). Phoebe Gloeckner’s portrayal of sexuality in *Diary of a Teenage Girl* is distorted in order to increase the sense of power imbalance implicit in the sexual relationships between a 15-year-old girl and a 38-year-old man. Julie Doucet is gleefully shameless, drawing tampons and rivers of blood. As Phoebe Gloeckner says in an interview, “Don’t you feel like...the less you hide certain things, the less personal, in a sense, your work becomes? Because everyone has experienced the same things or felt the same things. Everyone has gone to the bathroom for Christ’s sake... so even if it’s autobiographical, the kind of truer it is, the more it becomes everybody” (Chute & Jagoda 90). The frankness of these artists emboldened me as I set about drawing intimate details in my own life.

The autobiographical impulse has come under criticism for its self-indulgence and inherent narcissism. As noted by Charles Hatfield:

> Indeed Lasch, in his attack on New Journalism and the self-help and confessional literature of the seventies, seems to anticipate some commonplace criticisms of autobiographical comics. He criticizes the “confessional mode” for presenting personal experience without reflection, in “undigested” form, and also for appealing to “salacious curiosity” rather than the search for deep understanding. (129)

Perhaps this is the case with the hastily scrawled comics of blogs and zine fests, but as Alison Bechdel demonstrates in *Fun Home*, her autobiographical comics are exemplified the search for deep understanding. Spending six years creating it, she visited and revisited archival material, drawing on the letters, photographs and novels in her father’s collection, searching for themes and motivations and clues as to why her father may (or may not) have stepped in front of a truck.

Also, the process of creating a graphic novel-worthy comic insists on reflection. As the comic will end up as a large body of
work, drafts are required. My own comics had multiple states of evolution: from the initial drawings based on research, to sifting through that research, to the writing of a script, to planning out each chapter, to pencilling and then inking and colouring each page. Then scanning, refining in Adobe Photoshop and placing within an InDesign document. After this: more reflection and revision.

At an Auckland Women’s Centre presentation in 2014, Alison Bechdel described her rigorous process of creating her graphic novel: she scripted it all out in an Illustrator document, establishing the narrative flow before painstakingly drawing each panel, photographing herself in the poses and costumes of the characters, to ensure accuracy.

In establishing a very particular focus, in Bechdel’s case her father, and in mine, Katherine Mansfield and my desire to be a writer, a detachment and discipline is involved in arranging material to contribute towards the central themes. Telling stories through comics takes up a lot of space, and so much has to be left out in order to achieve the narrative goals. However, detail that would escape prose finds itself illustrated in panels – my settings required far greater attention to detail than descriptive passages in prose, where you can mention details in passing and leave the reader to fill in the blanks with their own knowledge.
Katherine Mansfield grappled with the notion of authenticity in her work. She railed against the falseness she perceived in her early stories, and in her letters. As she wrote on 2 November 1922, “whenever I am intense (really, this is so) I am a little bit false. Take my last letter and the one before. The tone was all wrong” (Murry 682).

Yet she cultivated artifice, famously saying to John Middleton Murry ‘don’t lower your mask unless you have another beneath, no matter how terrible’. She was constantly playing roles, assuming new identities, from the names she gave herself – Katya, Katinka, Kezia, Katherine (she was born a Kathleen) – to the various costumes and makeup she famously wore. Perhaps, as a colonial interloper in class-obsessed London she felt as though she couldn’t be herself – she had to play a particular role in order to be accepted by fashionable literary society.

Just as today we curate selves on social media platforms, Mansfield constructed a self through letters and appearances. She was aware that the self was not a fixed object, that it assumed multiple forms. She wrote in her journal:

True to oneself! Which self? Which of my many – well, really, that’s what it looks like coming to – hundreds of selves. For what with complexes and suppressions, and reactions and vibrations and reflections – there are moments when I feel I am nothing but the small clerk of some hotel without a proprietor who has all his work cut out to enter the names and hand the keys to the wilful guests. (Scott 203) (fig. 17)

The autobiographical comic is presenting an authentic self, but “life writing has a more complex relationship with the truth than explicitly fictional work” (El Rafaie 135). Why is this so? Is it because life is too vast and fractured to be captured within a
How dull it was, how boring to have the same advice written six times over. And then, even if it was Shakespeare that didn’t prevent it—oh! d’innocence from being fre evident! Of the day that if—True to oneself!

Which self? Which of my many—well really, that’s what it’s coming to—hundreds of selves?

fig. 17: Katherine Mansfield grapples with authenticity and self in her diaries
single text? I was very aware that the self that I was presenting in my comic was very specific – the one that appears within the parameters of Writer. Had I chosen another lens, writing about myself in relation to my parents or growing up with type 1 diabetes, a different story would have emerged. Had I honed in on a particular year, I would have presented a different self too. Mark Howe says:

> Our current needs, wishes, aspirations, and intents often control what is reported to others about our life experiences, if not the actual memories themselves that are being retrieved...Our self-concept is...contingent on memory...That is, recollections of ourselves in the context of a past play a critical role in our understanding and conceptualization of who we are today. (45)

Does one have to tell the truth in autobiography, or can the truth be altered to serve a storyline? Noted memoirist Mary Karr is definitive about this. “In fiction, you manufacture events to fit a concept or an idea. With memoir, you have the events and manufacture or hopefully deduce the concept. You don’t remember something? Write fiction” (Fortini). I find this statement challenging – I have written fiction which is a melding of personal experience and invention. And I cannot definitively say that everything depicted in my graphic novel is 100% true – Mansfield, for one, didn’t appear to me as a cynical punk rocker. There is a curious phenomenon that once you recount things, even if you change details in the telling, it feels like the truth – the ‘told’ truth overwrites the original truth. Memory is malleable, which is often so evident when two people try to remember the same event and have an entirely different version of it. But even Karr acknowledges the wriggle-room in memoir, the notion that Roland Barthes suggested, that the author is dead and there is no one truth, there are multiples: “One reason for a surge in memoir is the gradual erosion of objective notions of truth, which makes stuff like assembled dialogue seem more acceptable. We mistrust the old forms of authority—the church and politicians, even science. The subjective has power now” (Fortini).
Constructing my own story, I had to reinvent dialogue and reconstruct scenes, because there was no way I could possibly remember what I had said, or know what Mansfield had said, even if she’d written versions of the event down in her letters and journals. And yet I tried to stay true to my flawed remembering of events. I went to particular pains to portray the clothes I wore, as if they had talismanic powers. The avocado green cotton-lycra shirt I bought on sale from Zambesi, the sparkly silver vest I wore over top so you couldn’t see the exposed V of my belly – those clothes evoked the relationship I had with my body at the time, and they reminded me of the music, fashion and friendships that went along with them. There’s a writing exercise that I first encountered at a Mark Doty memoir course: you start by describing a piece of furniture in your childhood room, and work out from there. It’s amazing how many memories unspool; how many physical objects you can summon with their incumbent emotional contents. Knowing that the physical details are authentic lends an air of authenticity to everything around it – a belief that if you can remember this, then your other more ephemeral memories are also to be trusted.

Lynda Barry navigates this tricky space with her concept of ‘autobifictionalography’. She asks in her forward to One Hundred Demons: “Is it autobiography if parts of it are not true? Is it fiction if parts of it are?” (7). Her disrupting, destabilizing concept allows her to work in the liminal space between the two, and evoke a sense of truth and authenticity despite disclaiming their non-fiction status.

Perhaps it is easier to reach a truth through fiction, because all the distractions of fact can be whittled away, and characters can be altered to heighten the effect and make the themes seem all the more explicit. What someone like Lynda Barry might be reaching for is a ‘truthiness’ – something that, although it doesn’t strictly adhere to the facts, seems instinctively right.
Authenticity as expressed through comics

“According to Hartman (2002), contemporary western society is characterised by a deep yearning for the genuinely authentic” (El Rafaie 139). Comics can satisfy this, with their incredible handmade-ness, the self so evident in the linework. Art Spiegelman explains that comics are “as close to getting a clear copy of one’s diary or journal as one could have” (Chute, 11).

Spiegelman went to incredible lengths to render things accurately in Maus, feeling as though he could not write about Auschwitz until Pavel the psychiatrist helped him visualise the tincutter’s space (Maus II, 46). His father Vladek challenged him about including what he viewed as extraneous detail – Lucia suggesting that Vladek was marrying Anja for money – but Spiegelman insisted that this would “make everything more real – more human” (Maus I, 23). He asked Vladek to draw him a diagram of the hiding space (Maus I, 110). He was making it obvious to the reader that he had no way of accurately rendering the Auschwitz environment – he had to rely on other people’s accounts. He was also determined to portray Vladek not only as a noble hero, but also a stingy, incorrigible old man with racist tendencies. When I was trying to recreate the physical environments that Mansfield existed in, I drew heavily on a number of sources: photographs on the internet, Google maps, and her vivid physical descriptions, as found in her journals and letters. Mansfield’s biographers were diligent about noting her physical addresses, and thanks to Streetview, I was often able to see what her accommodation looked like from the outside, even if I had to imagine what it was like inside. I was as authentic as I could be, searching for picture reference to early twentieth century furniture and fixtures, but there was no way of knowing if they were the kind that Mansfield encountered, and I expected the reader to accept this as a historical reconstruction.

Memory and Authenticity

Memory is a notoriously wily beast, sometimes exact, sometimes absent altogether. It’s hard to know, with memories, if we are remembering things as they are, if our memories have been
changed in the retelling, or if we are remembering photographs of events instead of actual events. There is also a curious arbitrariness about memory – sometimes the most prosaic events are remembered in detail and vitally important moments are forgotten. Memories can be triggered by smells, sounds, physical objects, and be otherwise inaccessible. Sometimes memories that haven’t been accessed for years are the most pure, whereas memories that are often considered change with each consideration. El Rafaie writes:

...memory is a continuous process of reinterpreting, or re-remembering, the events of a life in the light of current interests and concerns...Kerby (1991) points out that our recollections of the past “cannot escape the historicity of our gaze and our interests” (p31) and that, consequently, “truth” in autobiographical narratives becomes “more a question of a certain adequacy to an implicit meaning of the past than of a historically correct representation or verisimilitude. (7)

In the process of creating the memoir section of *Mansfield and Me* I’ve had to reimagine some scenes. Does this make them untrue? Or is imagination the glue to stick the more accurate memories together? Writers have come undone making up parts of their memoir, most famously James Frey in his Oprah celebrated-then-damned memoir, *A Million Little Pieces*. In James Frey’s case, his two traffic tickets and 5 hours in a police cell turned into a crack and alcohol-fuelled rampage, where he hit a police officer, reacted violently and was sentenced to jail for 87 days. When his exaggeration was revealed, a nation turned on him, feeling duped out of the ‘truth’ a memoir promised. Frey explained his amped-up arrest contained a “truthiness” – it was the character he felt he had to be in order to survive. He told a Guardian reporter than when the manuscript was offered as a novel, no one was interested, but it gained much more traction as a memoir. The small imaginings that I’ve inserted don’t make any bold claims, or else they contain an air of fantasy – my conversations with Katherine Mansfield have a magical realist air about them. But I’ve tried to construct the truth of Katherine and my story using a novelist’s narrative arc and an editor’s elisions.
I’d now like to consider the technical aspects of comics, and how they function to tell a story. A phrase coined by Will Eisner to describe comics is ‘sequential art’. One image follows another in a sequence. Scott McCloud is at great pains to point out that the sequence of panels doesn’t necessarily follow – disparate images can sit side by side, and the viewer has to make an imaginative leap in order to connect the two.

Comics are concerned with time and the passing of it. They are time made visible on the page. Sometimes there are moments between panels, sometimes there are months and years. In creating Mansfield and Me I have experimented with pace, compressing seven years into two pages, or lingering in a cinematic way, so that another two pages can contain a few seconds of time.

Comics can also accommodate multiple time periods: “The spatial nature of the comics medium makes it possible to spatially juxtapose (and overlay) past and present and future moments on the page” (El Rafaie 95).

Because of this spatial nature, I’ve been able to juxtapose time across a spread and even across a page. There are many instances of time travel within Mansfield and Me – I employ flashbacks, wrinkles in time, imagination, dreams and parallel historic depictions. In chapter two, I move from a 1980s New Zealand classroom and scenes from 1980s movies to Mansfield’s depiction of an 1890s ball. Merging back into the classroom, I segue to 1921 Switzerland, where Mansfield wrote ‘Her First Ball’, and subsequently to Paris, where Mansfield sought experimental treatment for tuberculosis. The chapter ends in 1980s New Zealand, with me trying to write my own ball story. In chapter four, I employ time travel, with a twenty-something Mansfield visiting me at her birthplace. I then concentrate on the afternoon...
where Mansfield first entertains Murry in her flat, flashing back to a trip she made to Te Urewera as a teenager. In chapter 10, *Bombardment*, I juxtapose the image of the half-destroyed Twin Towers with a bombed-out WW1 Paris, intensifying the impression of senseless violence and history repeating itself.

Another key feature of comics is how reductive comics can be – the less detail that is put into a face, the more you can project on it. Scott McCloud demonstrates this in his eyeless spectacled persona who narrates *Understanding Comics*, insisting that this rendition is the most relatable. I have used this technique in drawing Mansfield, focusing on her trademark bob, small mouth and expressive eyebrows. Embodying McCloud’s observations, I found that the more I tried to render her accurately, the less she looked like herself – the almost-but-not-quite was less true than the simplified version. This provided a challenge when Mansfield was younger – her long curly hair was less iconic – but it also was a signifier as to which part of Mansfield’s life we were in, and also to her development as a serious writer. The bob meant business. (fig 18)

Comics are many things, and arguably trace their origins back to cave paintings and Egyptian art, to the images painted on ceramics in Asia, and the prints on tapa in the Pacific. Most recently they’ve been viewed digitally more than they’ve been seen in print. But I always imagined *Mansfield and Me* as a printed comic. As discussed in Critical Inquiry: Comics and Media:

Comics direct attention to the physical object of the book; Spiegelman puts it this way: “the physicality is part of what it is” [...] Seth expressed a view similar to many other cartoonists when he explained on the ‘Graphic Novel Forms Today” panel: “When you work on a comic it doesn’t feel that it truly exists until it is that final physical printed object. It is not the original art.” Clowes described...that comics to him, when finished, is like sculpture. It becomes a three-dimensional object (book) out of the space of his imagination ... it feels very much like a comic on the web is, you know, a website with pictures of a sculpture instead of the sculpture itself. (6)
The sheer weight of a book, the feel of paper, the smell of ink, its independence from the internet makes the book feel like a precious item, the home I would like for my work.

With this in mind, book design plays a part in the decisions made on the page. Unlike the web, where an image can be as long as you can scroll, the page insists on particular dimensions, on page numbers, gutters, end pages and book covers with blurbs and flaps. There is also potential to use double page spreads and multiple variations of the grid that underlies the comic, densely populating the page or opting for an airy minimalist approach, adjusting the pace and breathing room of the work.

A book contains other ephemera: the acknowledgements and the dedications, the imprint, the epigram, the blurb and the end pages. Each element adds a little more to the reader’s understanding of the author, the publisher, the work as a whole. A book is a sensory experience, a journey, an archaeological dig, a souvenir, a forensic document. It has weight.

fig. 18: Ida Baker cut off Mansfield’s hair in 1910, when she was unable to run a brush through it
METHODOLOGY
How I Began

As discussed in the literature review section, I began drafting my graphic novel by drawing and writing in my journal, in response to the biographies and letters I was reading. I spent five months doing this, filling up four journals, creating a draft of sorts, even though it would have little in common with the next iteration. Beginning with an impression of Mansfield’s birth, I chronologically charted her life, from her schooling in Wellington to her years in London, France, Germany, Switzerland and Italy. On one hand this was a valid approach but it felt a little more like an illustration job rather than crafting my own distinct graphic novel. I was not creating my own narrative – chronology was an obvious path that had been trodden before in conventional prose biographies. Also, because of the richness of the biographical detail, there was a breathless feeling about illustrating everything in her chronology, an ‘and then, and then, and then’. Given Mansfield’s peripatetic existence, there was an awful lot of moving about and not so much pausing in the moments.

As I made comics out of Mansfield’s experiences, I examined my own motivations. Why was I so fascinated by Mansfield? Was it because of the air of scandal that surrounded her? The notion that she was an early twentieth century badass who’d transgressed social norms? Or was it because I liked her stories so much? I did, even though I’d only read a quarter of them – I loved how everything could appear so perfect and then turn dark in an instance. I knew that one of the reasons I was fascinated by her was that she was New Zealand’s archetypal writer, and I was interested in archetypes, and identity, and what it meant to be a New Zealand artist, and whether one had to leave New Zealand to be one. I was compelled by her dalliance with famous modernists – her friendship with Virginia Woolf, Lytton Strachey,
D H Lawrence. Famous international writers had rated her. As New Zealanders, we always look for international reassurance, and Mansfield had received that.

Nearing the end of drawing her life, I realized that I couldn’t just write about Mansfield. She’d been written about to death. I had to come in with a new angle. Early on, Joanne Drayton suggested that I imagine her to be alive and for me to be having conversations with her, and so I made frequent comics of us talking together. Most often Mansfield was a bit rude, dismissive of my project, annoyed that such a cult of personality had been created. I wasn’t sure that she would be a friend – she was too clever, too mercurial for me to feel comfortable with her. But the slightly adversarial relationship meant that we could spar off each other and say unexpected things.

**Searching for Themes**

Once I’d created this draft, I took time to reflect on it, looking for particular angles. I needed to figure out how to shape the material, and how I would dovetail my own story with Mansfield’s. I felt a tension with juxtaposing my own, ordinary story with the extraordinary narrative of Mansfield’s life, and wondered if it was presumptuous even considering the pairing. However, I decided to be bold, as she had been a role model and I was interested in how the example of one person’s life can shape another’s. I was also interested in the identification/disidentification impulse, as described by Nancy K. Miller – how we are so keen to make connections that we will build bridges in precarious places. I identified the following themes:
Self-doubt
Cult of celebrity
Overlapping experiences
A writer's detachment
Observing rather than living
Transitoriness

Oh to be a writer,
A real writer

Fever, death as a creative driver
Bad taste in men
Fame, fame, fatal fame
(It does curious tricks to your brain)

Father, food
Sexuality—lesbianism
Wilde/Morrissey/Mansfield

Bloombery

Relationship
W/NZ—both
Cynical wellopping & creatively stifling

The war

Pregnancy
Childbirth
desiring for
Children
Friendships w/famous modernists
Out of this list I devised a few possible themes: ‘Would you like not like to try all sorts of lives – one is so very small – but that is the satisfaction of writing – one can impersonate people’, and the cult of personality: why are we so fascinated by people’s lives and their work? Why do we feel connected to famous people?

**Structuring the Book as a Whole**

After considering all the themes that I’d explored in my drafting/exploratory phase, I decided that ‘Oh to be a writer, a real writer’ was the most resonant one. There are chapters in which this theme is more explicit that in others, however, the implicit theme is that life and the accumulation of experience is what feeds into the writer’s creative well. Many graphic novelists like to thumbnail out an entire book before they pencil and ink it. I resist doing this because my experience as a novelist has taught me that stories are likely to shift and change as they are being created. However, in working on this book, I had a pretty clear idea as to where I was headed, and what parts of Mansfield’s life I wanted to highlight.

Focussing on the writing parts of my life, I crafted chapters that started in my own narrative and then segued into Manfield’s life, sometimes moving back and forth multiple times. At a certain point, I mapped out the themes and arc of the existing chapters and then outlined future chapters. My initial instinct – that if I thumbnailed an entire book I would invariably deviate from my plan – was correct, and my ten anticipated chapters became thirteen chapters. Although I initially intended to end the book with Mansfield’s death, that seemed too morbid, so after a period of reflection I wrote a final chapter with a more optimistic ending, one that mused on the nature of writing and the creative impulse.

**Scripting and Thumbnailing**

I initially attempted to script the graphic novel, as a creative experiment, but I found myself including detail that a graphic novel couldn’t accommodate. Instead I decided to reflect Mansfield’s practice and view each chapter as a self-contained short story, with a title. I thumbnailed each chapter (fig. 19) before drawing it, making small revisions as I transferred it to watercolour paper (fig. 20).
But about a month
6 weeks later my
phone rang.

Hello, is
that Sarah?

Yes, it is

This is Krystal
from the 1st.
I want to tell
you you’re
in the film!

Wow! Really?

fig. 19: very rough thumbnails broadly describing a scene
fig.20: final iteration on watercolour paper
**Choice of Drawing Materials**

I chose A4 250 gsm Stella art paper, heavy enough to hold watercolour without buckling. Ideally I would have liked to draw on A3 so that it would be easier to include detail and make corrections on the same page, but the only scanner I had access to was A4. I used India ink and a brush for my line work and then applied either watercolour or an India ink wash, depending on the page. I wanted the manuscript to be as analogue as possible, even though I would ultimately be scanning it into a computer and digitally manipulating it. I could have chosen to draw directly onto a tablet and digitally colour it. Instead, I felt the hand-drawn artefact had a direct relationship with all the journals, manuscripts and letters held by the Alexander Turnbull Library – there would be physical evidence of my labour. It would appear more “authentic”, betraying my mistakes, my variances of brush pressure, my too-long necks and wrong noses, my corrections in the margins. The hand-painting would add an air of historicity, reflecting illustration practices of the 1900s and 1920s. It would also suit the vernacular of contemporary illustration, which values the hand-drawn as an antithesis to digital lines.
I decided to base my comic on a 6-panel grid, each panel a perfect square. Although that would be my underlying structure, I would subvert this, having full-page images to offset the cramped squares, and playing with panel size within the grid so that the rhythm didn’t become repetitive. A regular grid gives a sense of security to the reader, creating an underlying visual tempo that can accommodate quavers and semibreves. The reader can relax, feeling as though there is order in the chaos of imagery, and be pleasantly surprised when the order is disrupted.

I studied lots of different artists’ approach to the grid. Gabrielle Bell, (fig.21) an autobiographical cartoonist I felt a thematic affinity to, sticks to the 6 panel grid and uses a limited colour palette throughout her comics to provide unity. Brecht Evens (fig.22) doesn’t seem to adhere to a grid at all, nor does he use the conventional speech bubbles, but then suddenly he does, relocating himself in comic book tradition. Reeta Niemensivu (fig.23) uses a grid but doesn’t worry about the black boxes around them, giving a far more organic, expressive effect. Dylan Horrocks (fig.24), in his latest book, *Sam Zabel and the Magic Pen*, has a six-panel grid as his foundation but is constantly interrupting this with inventive devices that echo tropes in comics vernacular.

Initially I butted my panels up together, motivated by space-saving needs, but after reviewing how they looked on the page I decided that they needed to sit apart with thin margins between them. Then I abandoned the borders altogether with the intention of indicating panel size through colouring, a la Reeta Niemensivu. I liked this approach because my lines were quite thick as it was, the black in danger of dominating, and I felt that the wobbly organic squares were sympathetic to my wobbly drawing, and the uncertainty and vulnerability I felt as I navigated through my life. I experimented with abandoning speech bubbles but decided that I liked their form too much to lose them, and besides, my comic was very text-rich. I experimented with different colour palettes to see how that would affect the mood and the reading of the comic.
On the other side of the crawlspace I found Sadie and her baby along with Tony, Helen, Jenni, and Steve!

Why did you all leave me?

Gabrielle, it's like this: we love you very much. But you can't stay here. You don't know how to do anything but make comics, keeping you here would just slow us down. You have nothing to contribute.

You can't even cook.

You guys left me while I was sleeping!

That's exactly it! You have to admit you're lazy. You slept through the apocalypse. What about Chub-chub? What does he contribute?

That's different. He has a future.

You can finish that, but then you gotta go, Steve. I don't get me wrong. Gabrielle. I feel the same for you as I always have. But you're a weak link. You could get us all killed, and what would be the point of that?

It's a different world now.

I'm not leaving! She's right. We'll have to kill her otherwise she'll come back as a zombie.

You should do it, Steve. You've known what my girlfriend, Jenni, has done to people.

Are you kidding? She's dead, you know. You do it, Jenni.

No, you.

We'll do it.

Will you guys just get it over with?

To be continued...

fig.21: Gabrielle Bell, from gabriellebell.com
fig.22: Brecht Evens, from *The Making Of*

fig.23: Reeta Niemensivu. from *La Nuit de la Saint-Jean*
fig. 24: Dylan Horrocks, from The Magic Pen
**Figuring Out the Best Way to Incorporate the Two Storylines.**

There were a number of ways I could differentiate my story from Mansfield’s. I could use colour palettes, as had Mary and Bryan Talbot, or I could run Mansfield’s story beneath my own as a parallel comic. I could juxtapose passages of text with comics, as had Phoebe Gloeckner in *Diary of a Teenage Girl*, and Roz Chast in *Can’t We Talk About Something More Pleasant*. Perhaps I could take a Chris Ware *Building Stories* approach, having the two comics as separate books to be read whichever way the reader encountered them first.

**Exploring Different Colour Palettes**

It was a difficult decision as to who would get the colour in the story: should I apply it to my own story since mine was the most vivid in my mind’s eye, or should it be applied to Mansfield’s, since she had the most colourful life? Or should Mansfield’s life be evoked in black and white, in keeping with the photography and cinema of her era? I experimented with various colour palettes, moving from highly coloured options to limited colour palettes (fig. 26). I came to the decision that I would colour Mansfield in monotone, as she came from the past and black and white and sepia imagery instantly evokes history, and is the medium in which she is photographed. I would include colour to heighten the drama in certain sections, including when she haemorrhaged and when she dreamt and imagined things (fig. 25). Some experiences were too vivid to be contained by black and white, and burst into colour as if by alchemy. I coloured Mansfield’s dreams and memories as an indication that they were not occurring in her depicted reality but existed in her subconscious. I chose to fully colour my own life as I had grown up with colour photography, and that was how my childhood was documented in the photo albums at my parents’ house.
fig.25: Mansfield’s night terrors
fig. 26: experimenting with various colour palettes
Oh look, Kirite Kanawa is going to play a free concert in New Zealand.

WHERE?
AT THE TRENTHAM RACE COURSE.

So she should. She owes us. We educated her & she abandoned us.

Well you can’t have much of an opera career in New Zealand.

So she should. She owes us. We educated her & she abandoned us.

Well you can’t have much of an opera career in New Zealand.
Influences: Rhythm

*Rhythm: Art Music Literature* was the magazine that John Middleton Murry established in 1911, and which Katherine Mansfield helped him edit from the June 1912 issue. It ran until 1913, and all issues can be found online, at The Modernist Journals Project, or in the Alexander Turnbull Library. *Rhythm* incorporated contemporary art, notably by Anne Estelle Rice, JD Fergusson, George Banks and Pablo Picasso. JD Fergusson designed the cover image, based on one of his paintings (fig.27).

The magazine explored art and the theory of rhythm in the arts, and was a major precursor of Vorticism, another modernist movement in British art and poetry.

Using the visual language of *Rhythm* (fig. 28-32), I explored how I might be able to incorporate some of its elements into my graphic novel, making more intertextual connections.
fig. 29 A series of faces drawn in the style of Anne Estelle Rice, centre top

fig. 30 George Banks' theatre design

fig. 31 André Derain illustration
fig 32. Clockwise from top left: George Banks’ theatre designs, my two versions of them, my Rice-inspired version of Murry climbing the stairs to Mansfield’s flat, my Rice-inspired illustration of Murry and Mansfield taking tea, Anne Estelle Rice’s illustration.
I also experimented with an insert, so that part of Mansfield and Murry’s story appeared within a faux Rhythm spread, including an excerpt of Mansfield’s story, *The Woman at the Store*. (fig.33) I considered whether this might work – in terms of design it was a striking addition, and it provided a platform to include Mansfield’s story in its native form – but ultimately removed it as I decided that it interrupted the narrative flow. By inserting such a large body of text I would be asking the viewer to switch modes of reading, which I feared would pull them out of the spell of a graphic novel. In all other places I’d rendered her stories through illustration, and one of my intentions was to prompt my readers to seek out Mansfield’s original stories, and to read them separately from my book. Bechdel quoted other literary texts in *Fun Home* but they were mitigated by superimposed narration boxes, or highlights on the most important part of the quote. The effect was that I only glanced at the quote, focusing instead on Bechdel’s analysis.
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### AGENTS FOR RHYTHM ABROAD:

- **PARIS.** PAul American Art Company, 180 Boulevard Montparnasse (Wholesale & Retail).
- **W. H. Smith & Son, Rue de Rivoli.**
- **Librairie Gallimard, Rue de Rivoli.**
- **Librairie Pierre, Boulevard des Italiens.**
- **Galeries Suquet, Rue Laffitte.**
- **Galeries de l’Europe, Rue Vignon.**
- **NEW YORK.** Broadsides, Union Square.
- **MUNICH.** Uther Peris, Reissamstrasse.
- **BERLIN.** Under arrangement.

**LANDSCAPE AT THE AGENT FAIR.**

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### THE WOMAN AT THE STORE

All that day the heat was intense. The soil there was dry and hard — it seemed among the tufted grass — sheltered along the road, so that the white pants and coat reached in our shade — smiled and lifted her hand as she came up and was like a dry-ripe stone for growth on our breasts. The horses panted along, coughing and studding. The path horses were rich — with a big open nose rubbed under the belly. Now and again she stopped short, threw back her head, looked at us as though she were going to say, and whispered. Hundreds of birds were scattered — they were slateohl, and the sound of the hawks reminded me of some pencil scraping over its surface. There was nothing to be seen but were after wave of waves — green — painted with purple orchids and crimson weeds — and there was a jangle of bells — to make them work. She wore a blue palette skirt, a red cravat and brown shoes — her hands — opened without — she looked as though she were a young blond — rounded her throat. Waves of her hair — a straight — under his — there was something — and eyebrows were pulled white — he smiled in the middle — grinning. The sun that day had such say, I don't say, for don't you know, my wife's mother was in front of me! ... It was the last day we had been without it for a month, and now there seemed something unnatural in his presence. He rode aside of me — while as a clown, his black eyes, dimpled, and the keys shining out his pockets and covering his lips. He had been in a larger wax — a pair of blue silk trousers, striped round the waist with a piafed feather belt. We had hardly spoken since dawn. At noon we had lunched off by biscuits and apricots by the side of a swampy area.
I was particularly influenced by the drawings of Anne Estelle Rice and George Banks, and used their images as references as to how I might apply my black lines. Their art was defined by the medium – there was only black and white printing – and my illustrations ceased to look as obviously influenced by theirs once I applied the ink wash, but one of my pages uses Anne Estelle Rice decorative elements (fig. 34). I had been hoping to include the story of Rice painting Mansfield within my graphic novel, but it had to be excluded because of space constraints, and I wished to obliquely refer to her in some way. I felt that this particular act, of twisting the pear stalk until it came out of the pear, had the sense of a tableau, which is how Rice’s images seem to be arranged. Figures become still lives, accompanied by floral arrangements and Eastern-inspired decorative elements. Mansfield’s brother had died, and Mansfield was arranging him in her memory, as one would a shrine.

fig. 34: my page from Mansfield and Me (right) inspired by Anne Estelle Rice’s decorative elements
Reproducing Mansfield’s archival documents

I’ve explicitly tried to reproduce Mansfield’s own handwriting but I’ve had to do a version of it – hers is so hard to read – based on letters I found at the Alexander Turnbull Library (fig. 35). I have found samples of Virginia Woolf’s original letters online, and reproduced her handwriting too. Handwriting is both particular to a person, but also shaped by an education system. Mansfield’s handwriting was curiously similar to my grandmother’s, who went to the same school as Mansfield, 23 years after her. Trying to emulate Mansfield’s handwriting was a way of inhabiting her, of summoning her on the page. It was also a way of paying particular attention to the way she curled the ascenders on her ds, how she flicked up the descenders on her gs and ys. Mansfield’s handwriting had messiness variance, depending on whether she was writing to a stranger or scribbling notes to herself. The notes to herself were never written for posterity, if clarity is anything to go by, and reading them gives you the uncomfortable sense that you are invading her privacy. After all, in August 1922 she’d asked Murry to do away with her papers: “Please destroy all letters you do not wish to keep & all papers. You know my love of tidiness. Have a clean sweep, Bogey, and leave all fair – will you?” This letter wasn’t published in the editions of letters that Murry edited, as he wanted to obscure the fact that he had gone against her wishes. Still, we are grateful that he did – he provided us with rich biographical information. The exercise of reproducing her handwriting adds to the air of authenticity and to the sense that I was creating her biography out of primary sources, unfiltered by other biographers.
fig. 35: letter to Princess Bibesco and my version of it
Researching contextual images on the internet

The internet has been an incredible resource in terms of picture reference. It provided me with PDFs of Rhythm. When trying to figure out how to draw men nude-wrestling, I found an image by Duncan Grant (fig. 36), a member of the Bloomsbury group. On YouTube I came across the nude wrestling scene in Ken Russell’s film of *Women in Love*, based on an encounter between DH Lawrence and John Middleton Murry. When drawing the Bloomsbury group, there was a wealth of imagery to draw upon: Duncan Grant, Mark Gertler, Dora Carrington, Vanessa Bell and Dorothy Brett were constantly painting scenes from Garsington and some of the key players in there. I reconstructed much of Virginia Woolf’s house and visage through paintings by Vanessa Bell. Although I am frequently referring to Mansfield’s letters and journals, and the existing biographies on her life to ensure accuracy in the telling of her story, I am also relying far more heavily on visual ephemera than a traditional biographer might, and I feel like I am seeing things differently as a result. I kept a Pinterest page (fig. 37), gathering up images related to my project.

*fig. 36: Duncan Grant’s illustration and my version*
Segues from Mansfield to me

I experimented with different strategies to bridge my story with Mansfield’s. Some were visual, many were thematic, and sometimes Mansfield broke through the fourth wall, appearing within the contemporary story in various guises, usually smoking a cigarette.

In **chapter one** I use water as a bridging device, symbolizing continuity and memory, as well as being a physical object that joined us.

**Chapter two** I use the heart as a unifying image, both metaphorically and literally. It threads together a scene from Mansfield’s story *Her First Ball*, Mansfield’s X-Ray treatments for her TB and my own adolescent desire.

In the **third chapter**, *O Mio Bambino Caro*, I experiment with a ribbon device in order to move between the stories. The ribbon appears initially as a title page, snakes through to represent the opera song and then wraps around Katherine and her father as they argue about her emigrating. Reviewing this chapter I feel like I could possibly make more of it, particularly in the scene where she loses her baby. It is an intertextual reference to Frida Kahlo, who used red ribbons, veins and tree roots to symbolise her connection to the land and to the suffering that defined her existence. Mansfield has artistic parallels with Kahlo, in that they both endured physical disability and died young as a result their infirmity. They share a cult of personality growing up around their art and life, although Kahlo depicted herself more deliberately than Mansfield, whose personal diaries and letters were published posthumously. Kahlo’s principal biographer, Hayden Hererra “sees Kahlo’s use of roots as a symbol of her unfulfilled desire to carry a pregnancy to term (The Paintings 91) but they also serve the more practical and visual purpose of connecting figures in her paintings” (Friis 55). Both of these uses could apply to my own illustrations, where I connect my life with Mansfield’s and communicate the loss of a baby.

fig. 37: (previous page) my Mansfield Pinterest page
fig. 38: (facing page) sea segue
In chapter four I get a bit meta, and Mansfield appears to me in the bedroom of her birthplace (fig.39), being disparaging about the Victorian mic-nacs. This is a device I played with a lot in my first sprawling draft and I was pleased to be able to introduce it here.

In chapter five I abandon segue devices and leap across to her story as an echoing theme. I move into a countryside house with a friend and it goes disastrously wrong; so does Mansfield when she and Murry move in with DH Lawrence and his wife Frieda. This is the Nancy K. Miller approach, in which reading someone else’s life prompts a remembering of one’s own parallel experiences. It is also a version of Kristeva’s reading-writing, in which I transpose Mansfield’s experiences into a contemporary setting in order to more fully understand her.

Chapter six: friendship is used as a segue, with my own story of trying to become part of a group echoing Mansfield’s story of visiting Garsington and the Bloomsbury group. I am trying to inject more glamour into my own social experiences, with the tongue-in-cheek implication that our own Bloomsbury group could be found down by the Manawatu River. This is prompted by the “World Famous in New Zealand” meme, popularised by the L&P advertising. I reprise this meme when Mansfield appears to us in chapter nine, telling us we are “world famous in Newtown”.

fig. 39: Mansfield appears to me in her birthpalce
Chapter seven: I have returned to a visual motif – that of the pear tree – and I have also used Thorndon, the place where Mansfield grew up with her brother as a theme. The pear tree is a portal into another world, that of the past. And Thorndon contains all the ghosts of the past.

Chapter eight: I use train journeys and ill-advised affairs as a unifying motif.

Chapter nine Katherine appears to explain her creative process and usher the reader into her world.

Chapter ten I use bombing as a theme, juxtaposing images of the planes flying into the Twin Towers with a bombed-out Paris, 1918.

Chapter eleven I bridge the gap with a baby – the arrival of my first child alongside Katherine’s ever-present longing for the child she lost. I also explore both of our productive writing times, hers fuelled by her impending sense of mortality, mine by impending motherhood.

Chapter twelve the pigeons on my roof fly into London, where Katherine goes to stay with Brett. I also coincide my own official arrival as a writer, aged 34, with Katherine’s retirement as a writer, and her subsequent death at 34.

Chapter thirteen I use Karori Normal School and the stand of pines as a gateway into Mansfield’s story ‘The Doll’s House’. It is in this, the final chapter, that I integrate Katherine Mansfield the most into the contemporary story, hoping for a visual sense that the strands are finally coming together.

On reflection, it’s most satisfying when the stories can be both visually and thematically united. This uses the comics medium to its best advantage. However, this was not always possible without seeming contrived – sometimes clean breaks were required.
In *Mansfield and Me* I have written about myself in an exposing manner, and have drawn upon living subjects. As Welby Ings quotes in his essay *Narcissus and the muse: supervisory implications of autobiographical, practice-led PhD design theses*:

my advice for a novice researcher planning to write about bulimia or attempted suicide, or any other stigmatized experience, is that they should imagine dressing up in sandwich boards and walking around the university proclaiming their stigma ... Like an inked tattoo, posting an autoethnography to a Web site or making it part of a curriculum vitae, the marking is permanent.

The article goes on to point out that even though the work submitted for examination marks a particular point in time, the candidate will not be able to change it post submission. It will remain in perpetuity, and the candidate has to consider how this might affect her or him professionally and personally.

I have considered the implications and am comfortable about exposing myself, as I believe my experiences, although particular to myself, have a universality to them. My story is a coming of age one, and an adjusting to parenthood and the realities of adulthood one. I imagine that readers will have points of intersection, in which they might remember their own experiences.

Through my years of blogging autobiographical comics, I have become accustomed to sharing my own personal stories and thoughts, and often find the ones that are the most honest and revealing are the ones that elicit the most honest and enthusiastic responses. Perhaps this is because, as Gloeckner suggests, the more personal an experience, the more universal it is. We imagine our experiences to be uniquely our own but in fact many people have gone through what we have. Readers/viewers find it
liberating when a person reveals a warts-and-all side of themselves – they are released from the pressure of being perfect, given permission to have dark thoughts and less-than-ideal experiences. And, given the proliferation of confessional blogs and articles, there is liberation and community to be found in exposing oneself, a shedding of shame that might have historically clung to the writer.

In regards to the real people that I have included in this book, I have sent principal characters a digital copy of the manuscript and asked them firstly if they are comfortable with how I have portrayed them, and secondly if they want me to change their names. They have responded positively towards my depiction of them, and have not asked me to obscure their identities. I have not sent the manuscript to incidental characters, instead opting to change their physical appearances and to omit naming them. I’ve found that even when writing novels, people close to me imagine themselves to be somehow implicated, possibly a model for a character, and I will be interested, after publication, as to whether people will receive this book differently.

I also feel that comics, as a stylised medium, disguise the identity of the subjects and only people who have known me for a long time will be able to identify the people involved.
IN CONCLUSION
Intertextuality has been integral in the creation of this graphic novel. Through a process of reading Mansfield’s letters, diaries, stories and biographies, I have created a work rich in intertextual detail. My memoir has been formed in response to her story, and I have used Mansfield’s own words to populate her speech and thought bubbles, and to shape her depicted experiences. People familiar with Mansfield’s work will note many implicit allusions, but the text remains decipherable to people with no prior knowledge of Mansfield’s work. Using intertextuality’s premise that no work stands alone, that it refers to network of texts, I have integrated references to songs, popular culture and literature far broader than Mansfield’s own work.

Using the critical framework of the autobiographical form, I have explored how comics lends themselves to memoir in their very creation – how, there is nothing more personal that handlettered text and drawings, and how drawing comics echoes the diarist’s impulse. I have also explored how the act of reading another’s biography prompts a sense of identification and disidentification, causing the reader to contemplate how their experiences overlap and diverge from their subject’s. I have examined the notion of authenticity and how it is constructed, and how the self is a shifting entity, subject to the framework from which it is being projected.

I have described my creative process – how, through multiple iterations, research and experimentation, my graphic novel took shape. I have approached my graphic memoir as a collection of short stories that form a whole, as planning the entire graphic memoir was too daunting a task. I have benefitted greatly from the wealth of images on the internet, chronicling the modernist era. I have enacted Kristeva’s process of ‘reading-writing’ by interpreting texts through drawing.
So how have I fared overall? Well, I finished my graphic memoir. It’s a 336-page document which was about two and a half years in the making. I found the process very labour-intensive, from the sifting through biographical detail to the shaping of the narrative, and then making decisions as to how the comic would sit on the page. I spent hours reading and re-reading letters, making extensive notes because I could not rely on my memory. I pencilled, inked, then coloured, feeling as though I would never be done with this project. Then scanning, correcting, placing within an Indesign document. Reflecting, revising. I submitted it for publication towards the end of 2015, and it was accepted by Victoria University Press. This outside endorsement made me feel as though my project had succeeded on one level – the industry had embraced it, willing to invest money in its publication.

There are places in which I feel I could have approached things differently: I wish that I was less reliant on language, I wish that my graphic novel was more cinematic, with more lingering moments and less historical gallops. Perhaps the scope of it was too ambitious: I could have made a graphic novel out of a small episode of Mansfield’s life, as others had done before me. I wish I could draw better, that my proportions were always correct, that my lines didn’t falter or I wasn’t so impatient and spent more time getting things right.

My theoretical framework served me well: it gave me the confidence to feel as though I didn’t have to tell Mansfield’s whole story, that the intertextual connections would tell it for me. It also gave me tools as to how to approach autobiography, memory and authenticity. Prompted by influences such as Alison Bechdel, I searched for ways to incorporate primary sources in my manuscript, filtered through my own hand for visual consistency. I used the critical reflective part of my project as a time to allow my existing work to sit, to compost, to benefit from space and distance. And I enjoyed the opportunity to explore and discuss my creative decisions, a privilege that one does not normally have in writing a book. Had I not used this critical framework, I would not have included so many redrawings of original letters, photographs and diaries. The work would be less “authentic.”
Working on this project had another curious phenomenon: it forced me to question if I wanted to be “a real writer” still. I often felt disheartened in the face of Mansfield’s brilliance. But I still had my storyteller’s impulse – to arrange, to find patterns, to put things into narrative arcs. So even though I would not be a real writer like Katherine Mansfield, I’d be another kind – in the process of writing this work, I taught myself how to be a graphic novelist.

There are not many New Zealand graphic novels, and none so far that have grappled with Mansfield and her legacy. I feel, in this regard, that I am offering up a new piece of work and a document with which to unpack it.
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