

## 'I made the scene': an interview with Carol Tyler

Vera Camden & Valentino Zullo

To cite this article: Vera Camden & Valentino Zullo (2021): 'I made the scene': an interview with Carol Tyler, Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics, DOI: [10.1080/21504857.2021.1925720](https://doi.org/10.1080/21504857.2021.1925720)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/21504857.2021.1925720>



Published online: 23 May 2021.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 12



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

INTERVIEW



## 'I made the scene': an interview with Carol Tyler

Vera Camden<sup>a</sup> and Valentino Zullo<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Department of English, Kent State University, Kent, OH, USA; <sup>b</sup>Liberal Arts, Cleveland Institute of Art, Cleveland, OH, USA

### ABSTRACT

In early 2021 we met with Carol Tyler over Zoom to discuss her comics, her participation in the underground comix community, and her forthcoming work, *The Ephemerata: Shaping the Exquisite Nature of My Grief*. Tyler shared her experiences making *Fab 4 Mania: A Beatles Obsession* and the *Concert of a Lifetime* as well as *Soldier's Heart: The Campaign to Understand My WWII Veteran Father: a Daughter's Memoir* while we communed over our love of comics and how the form is able to capture distinct experiences of trauma and grief, while making a good story. In our era filled with grief and loss, comics memoir persists as a medium that depicts such human feelings through image and text, while allowing us to find optimism in the fragile beauty of our world.

### ARTICLE HISTORY

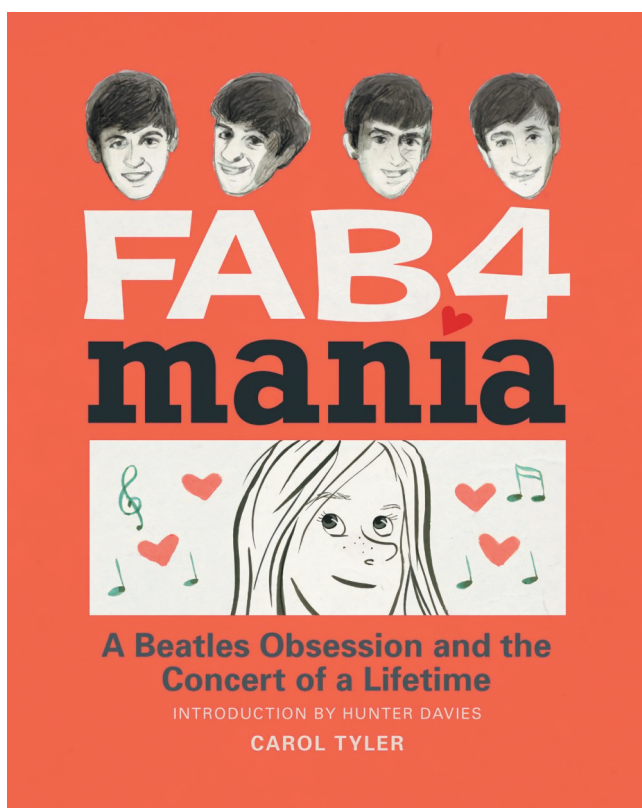
Received 22 March 2021

Accepted 29 April 2021

**Vera Camden and Valentino Zullo:** Hi, thank you for meeting with us. This is an honor. We're very excited to talk with you!

Can we start by discussing the underground movement as you were part of this history of comics, or 'what was left of it' as you say in your bio for *Soldier's Heart: The Campaign to Understand My WWII Veteran Father, A Daughter's Memoir*? As someone that was a participant and a first-hand witness of the underground comix movement creating stories for *Twisted Sisters*, *Wimmen's Comix*, and more, can you tell us about the communal relationships that the period is known for and how that influenced your comic storytelling?

**Tyler:** It's interesting that you say communal because there is a sense that we all got together and it may have been, to some extent, communal in that there was the focus of San Francisco in the late '60s and early '70s, and certainly where I ended up going to was San Francisco. I arrived well past the heyday of a community that had, by the time I got there, found its way into different fragments of some degree. The hubs, the community hubs, became these events, including Ron Turner's annual burrito parties at Last Gasp or I would meet people at Robert Armstrong's Halloween party. My plug-in was that invitations for these events, these get togethers, were for Justin Green, but he is not a social animal. It's painful for him to be in any social setting, so he always looked for ways to dodge that. About the time that I came on the scene he wasn't completely averse to doing any of that, and so I would say, 'Well, do you mind if I go? I would love to go.'



**Figure 1.** *Fab4 Mania*, Cover.

He would say, ‘Sure, I don’t care.’ So, I would go, and I was bold enough to walk in and say, ‘Hi!’ I just kind of, seized the opportunity or something – I ‘made the scene’ as it was called. I was always that type of person.

**Camden:** You made the scene. It must have been exciting.

**Tyler:** Well, how else are you going to meet people if you don’t make the scene?

**Camden and Zullo:** [laughs] Absolutely.

**Tyler:** And so, you show up at places. Once I figured out that I wanted to be an artist, I always looked for where to plant myself for excitement.

**Camden:** Well, that really comes through in *Fab4 Mania: A Beatles Obsession and the Concert of a Lifetime* (Figure 1). It’s really so cute, it’s so – I don’t mean to say ‘cute’ as in ‘cutesy’ but it’s –

**Tyler:** No, it is! It’s the voice of a thirteen-year-old girl. Nobody would listen to me. I wanted to go to this concert, and my family didn’t care.

**Camden:** It really was the concert of a lifetime. And you were there. You made the scene. That set the stage because once you've made that scene, there's really no other scene. What other scene can top that?

**Tyler:** Well, I did make many other scenes. A big one was the Olympics. Both of my brothers were on the bobsled team.

**Camden and Zullo:** Wow!

**Tyler:** Yeah, in 1980 I had my eye on Lake Placid, NY, which is where my brothers lived. I thought, 'Maybe I can get a job working for the Olympics.' So I applied for a job. 'I can stay at Joe's house.' He had little kids. Sure enough, I was hired. It was incredibly snowy and very cold, which limited the crowds to athletes, hardy people, locals, and the media covering it. For some reason, they gave me a press pass, all-access, I said, 'Not sure I need this for hanging out at the Unicef children's art show. Oh well.' Anyway, I ended up coordinating the closing ceremonies for the horn player, Chuck Mangione. Wild! Plus, because my brother Joe was on the US Olympic team, he got US team seating tickets which put us right up front to some hockey game that turned out to be the 'Miracle on Ice.'

**Camden and Zullo:** Did you keep a journal of that time as well – were you keeping a journal when you were at that game in 1980?

**Tyler:** I did. I have kept journals my whole life. I kept journals working at the Olympics and being at the games. And there were a couple of other times in my life where I found myself in incredible situations, especially, for example, when I lived in New York City. I would make the scene. I'd go to art shows and I'd meet artists. When I went to graduate school in Syracuse, I was the designated person to go pick up artists from the airport and through that I got to meet all these great artists. I had no trouble being bold and kind of stepping forward and saying, 'Hi!' And if I'd see a famous person on an airplane or something I'd say, 'Hi, I'm Carol Tyler. Do you want my autograph?' I'd say this to people as if I were someone famous. Anytime I saw somebody, I was just bold like that.

**Camden:** And it's a very cool way to keep in touch with a kind of cultural momentum, an edge – if you can sustain that kind of connectedness.

**Tyler:** I would tell my brothers, 'I don't know how you do it. I couldn't go down a bobsled run to save my life.' It seemed too risky, and I thought, 'That's because I play it safe. I don't take risks.' But then years later I realised, 'That's not true. I take risks a lot.' They've been a different kind, though, not running a bobsled off a cliff.

**Camden and Zullo:** You do take risks! Going from painting to comics, for example. That was a risk. Can you tell us about how you went from a degree in painting in the fine arts and shifted to comics in San Francisco?

**Tyler:** It's serpentine, but the truth is, I always wanted to tell a story. I love to tell stories. That's where I'm rooted. When I was in college, I'd stand up on my roommate's bed and blast out a crazy, funny story in front all my beer drinking friends. They'd be just laughing! At this same time, I was doing paintings about personal things; at the time



everything was abstract expressionist and colour field abstractions. Recognisable imagery was verboten. I would have painted, say, a pair of pants or something, and then there'd be a story behind it and so people would say 'what's this picture about?' And I'd say, 'Well, let me explain.'

And then I'd have an explanatory text card printed below the painting, telling what the picture was about. Then I thought, 'This is ridiculous. I should just put the words on the painting. Spell it out.'

**Camden:** Et voila! Comics.

**Tyler** Funny, because I was not at all a comics person. So many people say, 'well, I used to love to read *Batman*' or *Superman* or something. I mean, I had some access to that stuff and yeah, I did do my share of looking at that stuff, but comics were for boys, pretty much. My sister liked *Archie* and I hated that. I did like certain comics. I did like *Little Lulu* and later, as I became a little bit older, in high school, I really liked *Nancy* because it was there every day in the newspaper. Those strips I could relate to. I couldn't relate to *Mary Worth* or any of those *old people* comics. But *Nancy*, definitely I could relate to. *Nancy* was my go-to. I love the way it was so simple: boom, boom, joke! It'd be done. That world Ernie Bushmiller created was so complete that you could go b-dupe, b-dupe, b-dupe, and you'd get it. So, his sense of timing, his jokesmanship, the clarity and all those things, those had a lot of influence.

But then when I would be telling stories, of course – this is before *America's Funniest Home Videos* and *YouTube* – I focused in on my family and my parents because they cracked me up. You see there was a world I wasn't invited to when the peanut brittle came out at 9 o'clock and the club girls showed up to play cards. I had to go to bed. But really I would sit at the top of the stairs, listening to these people. I did a story about it once called 'Saturday Night and Sunday Morning'. (Figure 2) They'd just *cuss*, and they'd just be blab-blabbng and the wives would be here and the men would be over here and it just got to me how could they cuss like that and be so terribly bawdy on the one hand and then be the ushers at church the next day. [Laughter]

So, I was always an observer who collected stories and then told them. While standing on the bed in college, I would assume a character, like my Dad. He'd say, 'oh you son of a bitch!' in a certain way. I had to learn how he would talk, his inflections. I'd get into the head and the mind of the character. It started with being the pipsqueak and observing everything and kind of being present with *that* world. You brought up *Fab4*. All along I did record things because the nuns always had us writing down – anything valuable you wrote down.

**Camden:** So that was a discipline you derived from the nuns.

**Tyler:** Well, when Vatican II came, I think it was '62 when I was in school, we all got a brand-new Bic ballpoint pen, which was *new* technology. Then we wrote down everything that sisters told us about Vatican II and used it to practice writing in script. Handwriting skills. Then, we put those sheets into a booklet, between two sheets of manila paper. For the cover, out of construction paper, we cut out a dove with holy rays coming down. I used that same technique when it came time to make a log about the



Figure 2. From 'Saturday Night and Sunday Morning,' in *Late Bloomer*, 33.

Beatles. I put the handwritten account between two sheets of manila and decorated the cover. I wrote it all with a red Bic pen because it was most important.

**Camden and Zullo:** So, in terms of your decision when you produced *Fab4*, you draw a kind of a clear script up until the red pen the reader knows that what they have been



The Falcons play either at Gavin or Big Hollow because we don't have a gym. We always have to share the bathroom with girls from their school and from the other team. There's nothing that seems stranger than being with strangers in a strange bathroom while wearing a too-tight yellow vest. Some of them say they like the Beatles, but I don't believe them because they also like the Dave Clark 5 and Herman's Hermits. I consider them **FAKERS** and **PHYNQUES** (that's "finks" with fancy spelling).

Our team, the St. Bede Falcons **NEVER WIN**. We keep hollering to the others that our "team is on the beam." I'm not sure what that means but maybe they should get off because apparently, **OBVIOUSLY** being on the beam is not working out.

All 7 of us cheerleading vest girls practice after lunch in the school parking lot. and on Saturdays.

**V · I · C · T · O · R · Y** We each get a letter.

But we never get to **DO** that cheer, so we had to change that word victory to one that fits our great squad and our team, and that is:

**S · U · C · C · E · S · S** — Because after all, our team made some baskets. **V**

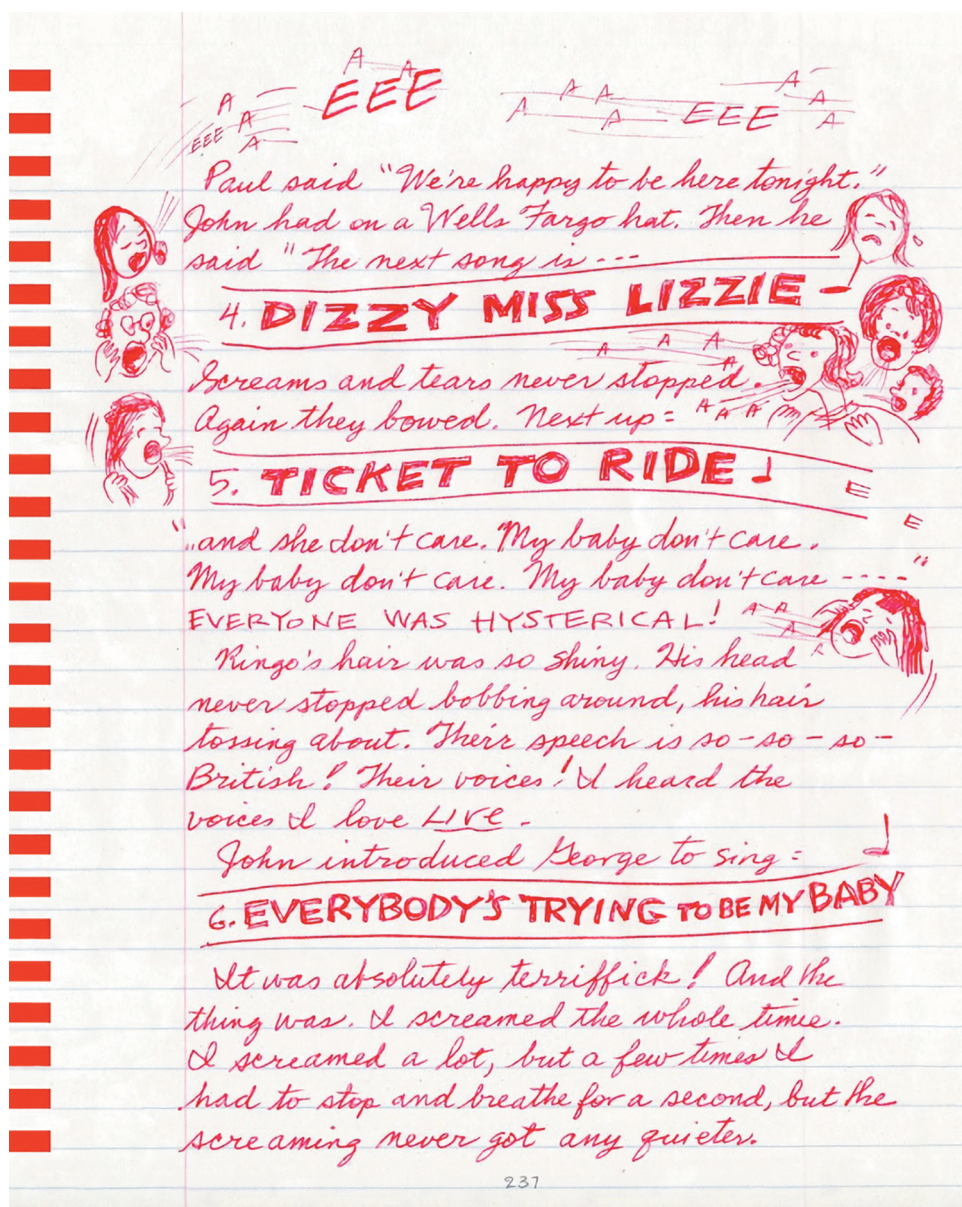
Figure 3. *Fab4 Mania*, 92.

reading has been your adult version of that script. And when you get to the red part, that's an actual replication of your journal.

**Tyler:** Alright, here's what happened. The journal with the red pen, over time – and I was dumb about this then – I wrote on this side of the paper and then I wrote on this side of the paper.

**Camden:** Oh, so it starts to blend in over time.





**Figure 4.** *Fab4 Mania*, 237.

**Tyler:** And because my handwriting really has not changed, I literally rewrote the pages for the reproduction. The original, you can't read too well, because it just bled through. It would have been a disaster to try to print it like that or read it. Also, knowing that so many people are growing up not knowing how to read cursive, I thought 'Okay the, I'm going to do a tutorial on cursive and they won't even notice.' I would write, T-H-E, and I would write a capital cursive T and then print h-e (Figure 3). And all throughout, I'd weave cursive letter forms through the words, through pages. And sometimes, cursive

writing things out all together so that by the time you get to the important red script, it's not abrupt (Figure 4). The reader will be able to decode what I have presented there.

All the content before the red section is from fragments – I had to construct something new from everything I kept. I didn't have the presence of mind, or the skills, at thirteen to do anything more elaborate. Scrapbook-y stuff, pieces and parts. I kept plenty. Lots of raw material to work with. I'd made a booklet called 'Eighth-grade memories' filled with greeting cards and the gifts I got and all the little notations; I kept notes that we had passed in class. It had all the details. That was invaluable. And, of course '37 Minutes of Madness,' which was what I called the red pen booklets with the Beatles' concert details.

*Fab4Mania* pulled these two together. I started with a giant timeline drawn right on the wall. Let's see . . . Valentine's came after Ed Sullivan. What did I do? Then that would trigger, oh yeah, that lady made Beatles cupcakes for the bake sale, and so on. All along I remembered the key things that happened during my eighth-grade year, helped along by the fragments I kept. So easy to fold those memories into the book because everything back then, *everything* was Beatles oriented in my world. And nobody else in my household cared. I make that clear in the book. But that was one of the appeals of the Beatles for me – that *they* didn't like it.

The Beatles helped me to become an independent person making choices and deciding what *I* thought was good and not having my brother, or sister, or somebody rain on my parade there. It took away their control. And so, I always think about Beatlemania like that. The music was spectacular. I had been living in a kind of darkness as a kid in a Catholic family who lived out in the middle of nowhere in bleak Fox Lake, Illinois. I didn't have any agency, and, so, the Beatles gave me a feeling that I had *power*. And even to this day when I see the *Meet the Beatles!* album cover, and I'm *thrilled* and it's not even anything that makes me think 'oh, a Beatle's album, I'm thrilled.' It is just [snaps fingers] immediately that I feel this jolt of love, uplift, excitement, possibility, and personal power. They were always and still are a delight!

**Camden:** They had optimism.

**Tyler:** And somebody would say to me inevitably, 'well then of course you like the Rolling Stones.' And I'd say, 'No! I don't like them.' There's anger there or something; it was *different*. The chord that Beatles struck was inspired. As I grew up and my musical taste increased, but it just seemed that the spectacular, brilliant quality of positiveness that the Beatles had endured.

Zullo: That comes across in your work too. Even *Soldier's Heart* ends on an optimistic note with the mother and daughter playing in Washington D.C. I don't know if it comes from the Beatles, but it is something you share with them.

**Tyler:** They certainly were a beacon for me. The early sixties were optimistic. You had John Kennedy asking us to give to our country, but by the late sixties the generations were at each other's throats because of the Vietnam war. I think the Beatles captured something that we grew up with in terms of hope. We started in the bubble of the fifties with hula-hoops and thinking the GI's had *crushed* Hitler and Tojo, and so we had a free world. They had cleaned up a big mess and they were exhausted and wanted to forget the

horrors of war and look to the future. Who could blame them? Nobody's going to want to think about or have COVID parties five years – ten years from now. I don't ever want to think about COVID again!

It was the same thing. Even if you were Stateside, the war horror was everywhere. When I think about where we are at politically today, what's missing is that thing that the Beatles gave us, that optimistic vibe of love to move forward that got in everything. We felt like we can get through this. And now, what I think, is 'oh, Gosh, how are we ever going to get through this?' They gave us hope that lifted our spirits.

**Camden and Zullo:** In *Soldier's Heart*, you capture the darkness that you work through with your father, that darkness that he didn't want to think about until it all came back to him in DC at the World War II memorial.

Is there something in the form of comics, in that wedding of image and word that might make memory *available* to telling these personal stories? Why do so many graphic narratives tell these painful, often liberating but still really painful, stories?

**Tyler:** I don't know. Not all of them are equal either.

**Camden:** True enough.

**Tyler:** There are those that are going to tell a story about, I hate to say this, but when your grandma died and then you end up thinking \*[whispers]\* 'I don't care.' The story didn't *do* something to move me. You have to say, 'so if I'm going to talk about my grandma dying, how do I make other people care about it, too?'

**Camden:** Absolutely. 'How can I make it timeless?' Justin Green does takes this incredibly peculiar, private fantasy and makes it timeless.

**Tyler:** It's held up.

**Camden and Zullo:** It's not only held up; it's prevailed.

**Tyler:** When I teach comics classes, I have a unit I do on *Binky Brown Meets the Holy Virgin Mary* and I have to say that lately the students have started to complain about the content. I warned them, I prepped them, we had discussions, we read in groups. I do everything. I tell students to call me if they're struggling with the content – anything to help them to understand this significant work. It's worth the read, and I explain why. But it's this new mind of cancel culture today, the way students are being taught, their objections have become quite vocal. These objections really get to me because this early comic is proven and groundbreaking and yet they resist its brilliance.

So, despite all that, you asked about why memoir? Well it's easy to want to talk about yourself. That's why I got into it, because I knew my own story, I was sure about that. I wasn't sure what modern art was up to. I loved modern art and I love art, but we would sit in those critiques and they'd go on and on and I'd think 'what are they talking about?' I didn't know. But I *did* know my dog makes a funny sound when he chews potatoes chips.

**Camden:** That's funny.

**Tyler:** Who could argue that? And the thing about comics is you know when you are done. In art school, the question we were always asked was, 'how do you know when

you're done?' I'd say, 'what, is this some kind of philosophical question? You're done when you're done.' With comics, you know when you're done because just like I said with Bushmiller, you start talking about it and you deliver at the end of the last panel, you deliver that gag and you get that sense of 'haha!' or 'wow, I get that!' So, you get that connect, something connects, something *works*. And I know it instinctively in comics.

And I'll tell you the other thing. I had trouble reading as a kid. I was the kid that was going like 'the b-b-bu.' And the kids were going 'pfft, she's stupid.' \*mimicking kids voice\* 'Don't let – oh, no, she's going to read!' And it was because I was four when I was sent to kindergarten because my birthday was in November. So, I went a little too early and my brain was just not ready to do the decoding of syllables and sounds. I did learn to read for information, but I never got into pleasure reading because it was so painful to read.

As a comics writer, I had to work extra hard at figuring out – well I could say, 'boy that's dumb' or I could say 'intellect cannot be applied at this time.' So, I had to figure out when to say, 'boy is that dumb' and when to say, 'intellect cannot be applied here.' And then figured out a character would say 'boy that's dumb,' but a narrator would say the other.

**Camden and Zullo:** That's an interesting way to put it. So, you sort of found different voices within your own self.

**Tyler:** I learn more by listening than reading – I still can't read for pleasure. Part of that is because when I was growing, up my dad would say, 'what the hell are you doing sitting around reading a book for? We've work to do!' There would always be some bucket that had to be filled up with something or we'd have to move that pile of stuff from there to there. He saw us as little workers and so you could do your homework, but if you wanted to sit down and read a book, no. And now, first of all, which one of these thousands of books do I pick? Since my time is so precious, I have to pick one. I have no clue. I can't do that. And even if I did get started on a book – if I tried to take my sister's *Nancy Drew*, she'd snatch it out of my hand, 'that's not yours.' Comic books were my brother's. So, my mom had this big, thick book from the 1920's about diseases and I began to look things up like, 'palsy, what's that?' And so, I would go to the dictionary and look up words.

**Camden and Zullo:** You were talking about form and structure, how you don't really restrict yourself or your stories. For example, in *Soldier's Heart*, you have these lovely giant pages that look painted rather than just splash pages and even in *Fab4 Mania* you challenge how we think of comics. How do you understand the structure of comics?

**Tyler:** In order to tell the story, I had to invent original page structures and vary them in *Soldier's Heart*. For example, there are some double pages, there are some with six panels on the page, some have twelve. To me, that has to do with how fast they're to be read, the emotion to convey. Like that sense of grandeur when my dad and I walk down into the memorial in D.C., and we stand back – and it opens up. It lifts. To me, the memorial was like a cathedral ([Figure 5](#)). I had been in an old cathedral a few months earlier, right before I did that part. I walked in it took my breath away, how a space can be that transformative. And there are places like that, there's certain places when you're out in the woods you walk and maybe the trees part here in this little grove and the light comes



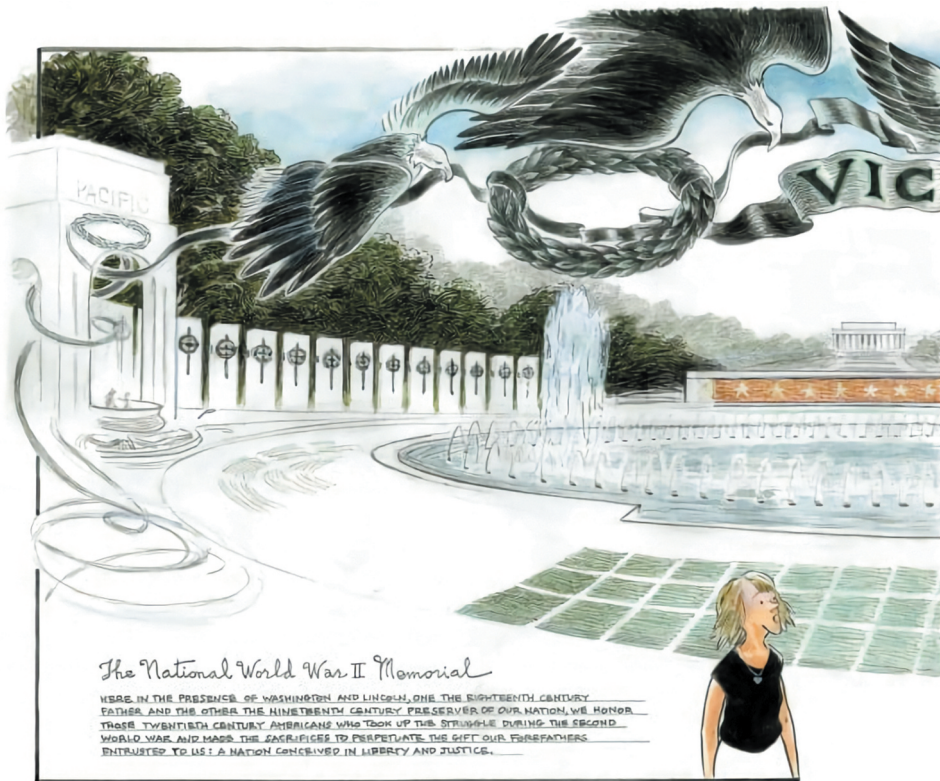


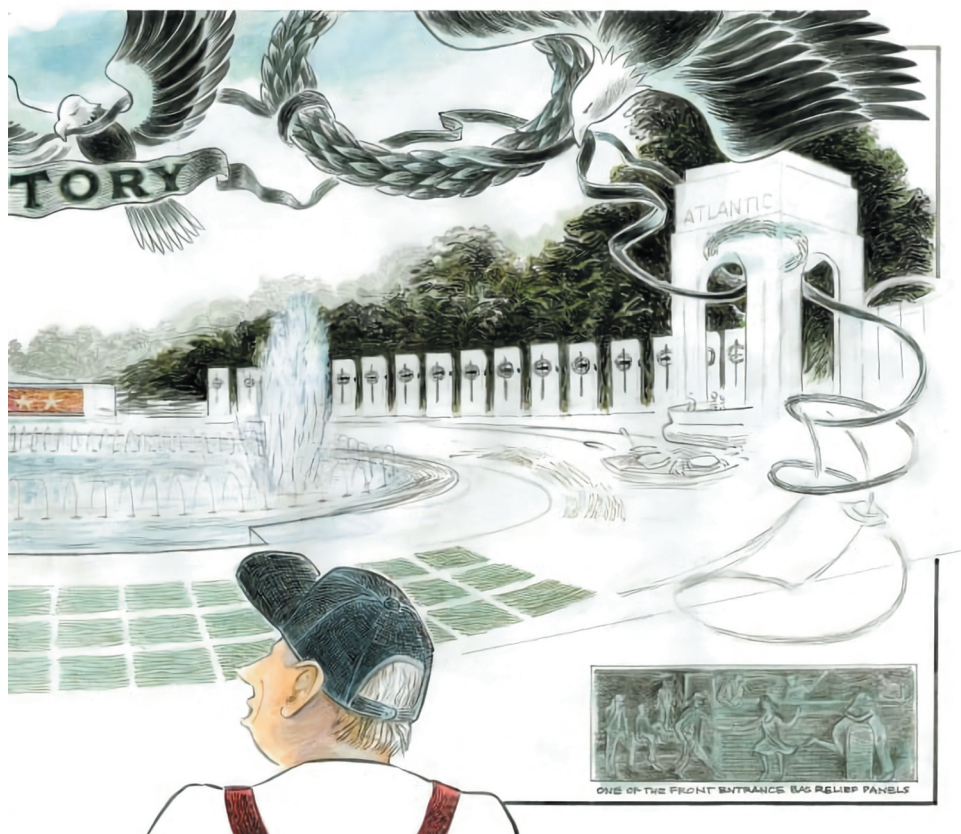
Figure 5a. *Soldier's Heart*, 318–19.

through. So, of course, why would you break that into tiny little panels that needs to feel like the largeness of that moment?

I have a sense when and how to do these landscapes. I can't exactly say, where that comes from, but it does go back to the work I did for *Weirdo*. When I'd have to learn to do one page or two pages or Aline [Kominsky-Crumb] would call me, she'd say, 'can you get three pages to me by Friday?' I would reply, 'Well, I have a two pager, okay I'll make it into a three.' So, knowing how to take that and say I'm going to do this in three pages or this one in two or one, then, *Soldier's Heart* became a series of one, two, three, ten, fifteen pagers with transitions in between to convey various ideas.

When you're doing a graphic memoir, you have to *plan* for where pages will appear, where this and that is going to go. And so, you think to yourself, 'okay, I have that and that has to do with timing and that had to do with setting a mood.' There are things that you don't think about so much because now you're thinking about how the reader is going to connect to the work. I think, 'they're going to have it on their lap, they're going to be reading it in bed, or they're going to be in a comfy chair, at the table.' So, the act of turning the pages, how will that feel? And when they turn the page, if I've set it up right, they turn the page, they should go 'oh wow!' Then there's the flow of the panels – we read from upper left to lower right. But there's some pages in *Soldier's Heart* where I play

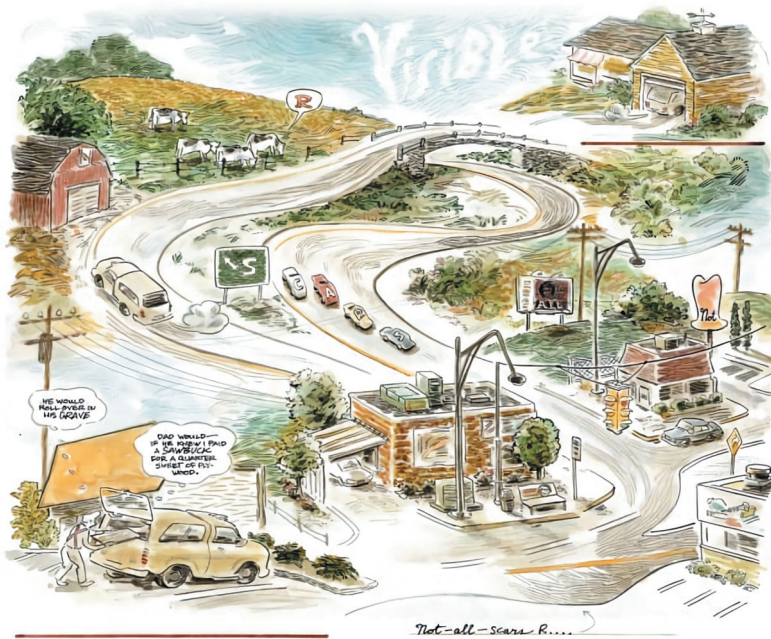




**Figure 5b.**

around with how the eye moves across the page and where you pick up information and how it leads you, maybe, backwards through the page.

The main thing I was trying to do was help the reader flow through the panels, while aware of how the eye moves throughout the pages. I wanted to pull the reader along with me on the journey. I'll give you an example from the book. At the beginning, Dad is at the big box store and he's complaining about the price of – he needed a quarter piece of plywood and he was grumbling and complaining about the price. If you saw him at one of these stores you would not know that he had been in this great war. And then it shows three little panels at the bottom where he's checking out and the ladies are more concerned about their grandkids and showing each other's pictures of this and that. And I'm thinking: 'wait a minute, this guy was in the big war! Pay attention to him!'. After that there is a scene where he's sliding the plywood into the back of the truck. This is at the bottom of the page and the plywood slips across the gutter into the truck on the next page, lower left. So, to get Dad home and the reader to the next page after that, the truck drives through a landscape, spelling out the thesis of the book through various road signs and visual elements along the way. 'Not all scars are visible' is there to discover in a big letter 'S' across the page. (Figure 6).



**Figure 6.** From *Soldier's Heart*, 12–13.

**Camden and Zullo:** Serpentine. You are interested in the reader reflecting on what they are looking at in your comic. It's not unlike what you were saying about *Fab4 Mania* as you teach cursive to your reader.

**Tyler:** Yes. I enjoy designing that sort of pliability where I can take the reader's eye around the page – there's a couple other places where the readers have to follow the clues, visual clues, that works throughout the page to help create movement or help to capture, like going up and down stairs for example. It's hard to draw going up and down stairs. I don't enjoy drawing staircases. So, I had to draw to the effect of stair climbing, making the eyes go up and come back down while maintaining the reader's attention. Or, Dad's truck would be going to the right and then would pivot and then it would head the other way and sometimes, I'd add an arrow so you'd read from right to left and then you'd go down again and read from left to right. I wanted to represent the motion of actually 'going back and forth,' rather than just reading about it. I was very aware of not only having to convey that within the panel, but then consider how that was affecting the whole page, the opposing page, and so on.

**Camden and Zullo:** You reward the reader for paying attention to detail. The reader is becoming a part of the process – the eye, the self becomes part of the narrative experience.

Okay so, one of the things we're curious about is what are you working on now?

**Tyler:** My current project is called *The Ephemerata: Shaping the Exquisite Nature of My Grief*. It's a long story about mourning. Here's the rationale: *Soldier's Heart* was originally a trilogy called *You'll Never Know* (YNK). My parents are the main subjects in the books. *Soldier's Heart* also has 60 additional pages that were not in the YNK trilogy. While I was working on this project, I was part-time taking care of them. Eventually they passed away. My mom got to see the second book of YNK, my dad got to see all three, but he didn't get to see the completed *Soldier's Heart*, as he passed away in 2015. When I got through with the YNK trilogy before *Soldier's Heart*, I knocked out *Fab4 Mania*. It had been a four-hour drive each way back and forth to visit my parents for 15 years. After Mom died, my sister got sick and she passed away. My daughter was living at home, she'd been there since the economic crash of 2008, and dragged her boyfriend with her. We didn't realise he was a heroin addict until about three and four years into his being here and me missing stuff all the time, you know, not knowing where did this go or where did that go. I thought I had a twenty in my coat. In fact, I *know* I had a twenty-dollar bill in my coat. Grrr. And trying to just kind of get through all of that and once the addict was gone and after the last funeral, I did *Fab4* because I needed some fun.

After everything that happened, I was thrown into – I found myself completely deep in mourning with pretty much nobody to talk to as Julia had moved out and Justin, as I said, is not a social being. So, isolation came to me a long time before COVID. I thought, 'I guess I should do a story about what happened with my sister and my family.' I tried drawing it out, but it was too epic and too raw. I was a wreck. I was in mourning and guess what, the world doesn't recognise mourning very well. We have no particular rituals like they did in the Nineteenth Century, for example. So, then I started to think about *that*. I started to think about, what is this *thing* that happens with death? Then the big question hounded me: where do people go when they die? Plus, I just was amazed at how transformative the effect was of people dying.

And then one night I woke up and thought I was having a stroke and I walked in the kitchen and began to have visions as if I were on an acid trip and I thought, 'what the hell is going on?' There was a place, with characters and its own logic and language. While searching so hard in my mind and in my grief, to figure out what the hell was going on, I stumbled into a personal way to interpret death, dying and the process of grieving. And so, that's what I've been coursing through. Interpreting that hallucination that had something to do with specific, found place offering answers.

While this next is a book about grief and mourning, it also has a fantasy element. I've never done that before. And it's all in black and white, like my earliest comics work. I had been a painter with a terrific sense of colour. When I became a cartoonist, I had to learn the rigid rules of graphics, how to rule borders, proper comics lettering techniques, and pen and ink skills. I did colour comics starting in the 90s and have ever since, but for *The Ephemerata*, I've gone back to black and white. The subject matter is really intense, but doing it is fun so far and full of discoveries. Also, I must do a better job than I did before. That's the working-class girl in me: aiming towards the ever-elusive mastery.

**Camden and Zullo:** Your work will help us to understand grief and how we inherit grief; you now own this land. You bring an important connection to space and how we inhabit space while grieving.





Figure 7. From *Soldier's Heart*, 170.

**Tyler:** Well the other thing I didn't say, I forgot to say, was the other emergence from *The Ephemerata*: sculpture. And so, some of the elements that I've been thinking about, that I draw in the book are wall pieces, and installation art. There's large structure that is fifteen feet tall and ten feet deep I've drawn up the plans for. First I've got to build a shop.

**Camden and Zullo:** That extends the multimedia experience of comics as we see you existing within the space you're creating.

**Tyler:** Did you ever see the art show? Did I show you the video of the art show I had a few years ago?

It was all the pages of *Soldier's Heart*.<sup>1</sup> This was at my school at the University of Cincinnati. I said to the curator, "I have all these pages and I don't want to frame

everything, so, ‘why can’t they be on clothesline?’ So, the curator put everything – he hung the clotheslines high enough that people couldn’t touch the artwork. And there was some work on the walls.

**Camden and Zullo:** There was one page that they did a close up zoom of with you father and you both in the doctor’s office where he is laying back and it almost feels like a therapeutic session (Figure 7). Of course, you are both in the doctor’s office, but it’s so interesting how you see these cartoons differently hanging there as a stand-alone image, almost like a *New Yorker* cartoon.

**Tyler:** The video captures all that stuff I had just taken out of their house when we settled the estate. Part of *The Ephemerata* has to do with their stuff.

The trick has been boiling it down to a few objects that symbolise different things. This was liberating. I realised I would not be able to retell everything as it happened. I decided to make a book that sings more to my heart. I talk about losing people, but I also talk about the visions and the way forward. ‘Boil it down, Tyler. Figure out what’s the heart of the matter. What are the two or three most important takeaways?’ I’ve been working on it *loosely*, for about five years. About 3 years ago, I literally sat down one day and boom – the entire map of Griefville poured out in one shot. It’s an eight-foot-long map.

I’m hoping *The Ephemerata* will be out by 2023, the ten-year anniversary of losing my sister.

**Camden and Zullo:** Well I can tell you that *we* want it.

**Tyler:** Just make sure you really enjoy the time you spend with it because time is limited as you get older, and let’s make it be *art* and not this *drag*. Retired friends of mine say, ‘Oh, I was thinking about doing a graphic novel.’ And I say, ‘Oh my god, don’t! What’s the matter with you?! Go enjoy your life!’

**Zullo:** That’s very funny. There’s nothing about what you are doing that is easy or easily replicable.

**Tyler:** It’s the hardest thing. I know the kids today, they use computers, and they bucket fill colour, and they can snap through producing those books. I can’t do that. The act of making comics is the act of art; I don’t bucket fill and call it art!

**Camden and Zullo:** Your method of creating is seems to emerge from your transition from painting to comics. You added narrative to your paintings. Comics is your art.

That seems like a nice place to stop. Thank you for sharing your time with us today.

**Tyler:** Thank you. This was fun.

## Note

1. During the interview we watched a video of the installation of Carol Tyler’s work, ‘Pages and Progress’ displayed at the University of Cincinnati: <https://vimeo.com/158968730>

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## Notes on contributors

**Vera Camden** is Professor of English at Kent State University, Clinical Assistant Professor of Psychiatry at Case Western Reserve University, and Training and Supervising Analyst at the Cleveland Psychoanalytic Center. She is associate editor of *American Imago* and American editor of the *Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics*. She is also editor of the forthcoming *Cambridge Companion to Literature and Psychoanalysis*.

**Valentino Zullo** teaches at the Cleveland Institute of Art and he is the Ohio Center for the Book Scholar-in-Residence where he co-leads the Get Graphic program. He is also licensed social worker practicing as a maternal depression therapist at OhioGuidestone and American editor of the *Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics*.