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Irish Identity and Narrative Form in Contemporary Graphic Novels: The Case of Debbie Jenkinson's *Midlands*

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Abstract

This essay explores the semiotic complexity and cultural significance of Debbie Jenkinson's *Midlands* (2023), situating it within the evolving landscape of Irish graphic storytelling. Through a close analysis of visual grammar and panel structure, the essay examines how *Midlands* addresses themes of grief, belonging, and identity formation in the aftermath of personal and cultural disruption. Drawing on semiotic theory, Irish literary traditions, and the legacy of oral storytelling, the article positions *Midlands* as a quiet but radical contribution to the Irish literary canon – one that reimagines inherited narrative forms through the lens of sequential art. Rather than focusing on mythic or heroic tropes, Jenkinson turns to the textures of everyday life, using visual narrative to explore emotional ambiguity and psychological transition. The essay argues that *Midlands* marks a significant evolution in the expressive potential of Irish graphic literature, both theoretically and formally.

Keywords: Graphic Novel Storytelling, Irish Literature Evolution, Rural Identity in Graphic Novels, Visual-textual Narratives in Ireland

1. Introduction

It [the graphic novel] is a form that also always refuses a problematic transparency, through an explicit awareness of its own surfaces. (Chute 2006, 767)

The graphic novel has emerged as a medium of growing cultural and academic relevance in the landscape of contemporary narrative forms. Far from the less sophisticated and youth-oriented status long assigned to comic books, the graphic novel combines literary depth with visual artistry to produce a unique and complex mode of storytelling (cf. Baetens, Frey 2015). Rooted in ancient visual storytelling traditions, such as

the Egyptian murals and the medieval tapestries, during the 19th century comics evolved into a recognised narrative medium, driven by illustrated periodicals and satirical prints (Sabin 1996; Groensteen 2007 [1999]). The evolution of modern comics accelerated with the publication of Richard Felton Outcault's *The Yellow Kid* in the late 1890s, which is often cited as the first American comic strip¹. Like Winsor McCay's *Little Nemo in Slumberland* (1905-1911)², *The Yellow Kid* contributed to establishing foundational conventions, like panels to organise narrative flow, speech bubbles for dialogue, and dynamic layouts to intensify visual impact. Though often humorous or fantastical in nature, these early strips demonstrated the medium's potential for sequential narrative expression. Throughout the 20th century, serialised comic books, especially those featuring superheroes, dominated the industry but they were largely perceived as juvenile or lowbrow, early examples including *Action Comics* #1 (1938), which introduced Superman, and *Detective Comics* #27 (1939), the debut of Batman, all of which helped establish the superhero genre as a cultural force. Later, Marvel Comics expanded the genre with characters like Spider-Man, Iron Man, and The Fantastic Four in the 1960s, which appealed to younger audiences with action-driven, formulaic plots, and brightly coloured art styles. These works were extremely popular, but they were often dismissed by critics and educators as escapist entertainment lacking literary value. By mid-century, however, several creators began to explore the medium's potential for more "serious" storytelling. The term "graphic novel" gained currency in the late 1970s and early 1980s, notably with Will Eisner's *A Contract with God and Other Tenement Stories* (1978), which sought to elevate the medium's narrative and artistic ambitions³. Eisner himself defined comics as "sequential art", emphasising the formal characteristics that distinguish the medium from static visual art and conventional literature, introducing self-contained stories that addressed mature themes such as loss, faith, and the complexities of urban life (Eisner, 1985; Baetens, Frey 2015).

A key moment in the evolution of the graphic novel as a literary genre is the landmark work, *Maus* by Art Spiegelman (serialized from 1980 and published in a single volume in 1991), which recounts the Holocaust through an allegorical use of anthropomorphic characters. Rather than simply legitimising the form, *Maus* marked a critical turning point in how graphic novels were received within literary and academic circles, illustrating their capacity to engage with historical trauma and ethical memory through distinctly visual means. *Maus* exemplifies

¹ *The Yellow Kid* (Mickey Dugan) is a pivotal figure in early American comic strip history, appearing between 1895 and 1898, first in Joseph Pulitzer's *New York World* and later in William Randolph Hearst's *New York Journal*. Created and illustrated by R.F. Outcault, the character debuted in the comic strip *Hogan's Alley* – one of the earliest Sunday supplement comics featured in American newspapers. Although the visual conventions of sequential cartooning were already present in political and entertainment caricatures, *Hogan's Alley* helped define the comic strip as a popular cultural form. Outcault's innovative use of word balloons in *The Yellow Kid* significantly influenced the standard format of later comic strips and comic books.

² *Little Nemo in Slumberland* originally ran in the *New York Herald* from October 15, 1905, to July 23, 1911. When McCay moved to William Randolph Hearst's *New York American*, the strip was rebranded as *In the Land of Wonderful Dreams* and continued publication from September 3, 1911, to July 26, 1914. McCay later returned to the Herald in 1924, reviving *Little Nemo in Slumberland*, which ran again from August 3, 1924, until January 9, 1927, when McCay once more rejoined Hearst's press.

³ Composed of four interconnected stories, the book portrays the lives of impoverished Jewish residents in a New York City tenement, offering a poignant exploration of urban struggle, identity, and disillusionment. Thematically, the stories are united by motifs of alienation, moral ambiguity, ethnic tension, and the fragility of human hope, capturing the raw and complex realities of tenement life with unflinching honesty. Although Eisner did not coin the term "graphic novel", this work is widely credited with bringing the format into broader public awareness and legitimizing it as a serious literary form.

the graphic novel's ability to convey trauma through fragmentation, visual metaphor, and metafictional techniques, aligning with Cathy Caruth's observation that "to be traumatized is precisely to be possessed by an image or an event" (Caruth 1993, 4-5). Its recursive narrative structure, coupled with metafictional reflection, underscores the graphic novel's potential for literary complexity and critical depth⁴. During the same period, works like Alan Moore's *Watchmen* (1987) and Frank Miller's *The Dark Knight Returns* (1987) redefined the superhero genre. These texts responded critically to the moral absolutism and ideological simplicity of earlier superhero narratives through introducing psychological depth, moral ambiguity, and sociopolitical critique. In doing so, they also catalysed a broader re-evaluation of canonical characters. For instance, *Wonder Woman*, who was originally conceived by William Moulton Marston as a feminist icon, over the decades had been stripped of much of her radical edge. Her 1980s reinvention by George Pérez reinstated a more complex and mythologically grounded version of the character, aligning with the genre's broader shift toward narrative maturity and ideological self-awareness. Their innovative use of panel arrangements and visual motifs deepened narrative structure and reader engagement. The 21st century has witnessed the continued evolution of the graphic novel into a versatile and critically engaged literary form, capable of addressing a wide range of complex subjects. Works such as Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* (2000-2003) merge personal memory with political critique, offering a postcolonial perspective on the Iranian Revolution. Similarly, Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home* (2006) explores family dynamics, sexuality, and psychological introspection through a layered visual and narrative structure that blurs the boundaries between memoir and literary fiction. In parallel, Thi Bui's *The Best We Could Do* (2017)⁵ and Joe Sacco's *Palestine* (2001)⁶ exemplify the graphic novel's potential to function as a repository of memory and a vehicle for ethical inquiry, documenting displacement, trauma, and cultural identity with formal inventiveness. Like *Maus*, these works demonstrate how the interplay of image and text can powerfully convey historical and personal trauma. Their use of visual metaphors, fragmented temporality, and recursive storytelling structures positions the graphic novel as a vital medium for representing experiences that resist linear narration, underscoring its critical and affective capacities in contemporary world literature.

The graphic novel is a hybrid form situated at the crossroads of visual art and written language, and it operates through a semiotic system that distributes meaning across multiple channels. Drawing on Umberto Eco's (1975) semiotic theory, which posits that any sign system can function as a language when governed by codes, the graphic novel can be said to integrate images, text, typography, panel structure, and spatial organization into a cohesive expressive form. Each panel functions not only as a container of visual information, but also as a temporal and spatial unit. The size shape, and sequencing affect, narrative rhythm and reader's interpretation. The gutter – the space between panels – invites the reader to perform "closure", a term McCloud uses to describe the cognitive process of inferring meaning between images⁷. Speech balloons and

⁴ As Simona Porro puts it, "Maus turned out to be one of the most controversial – and convincing – examples of postmodernist rethinking of historical writing" (2012, 103)

⁵ *The Best We Could Do* (2017) is an illustrated memoir by Thi Bui that traces her family's experiences before and during the Vietnam War, their perilous escape from Vietnam during her childhood, and their resettlement in the United States as refugees. The graphic novel was released on March 7, 2017. See Oh 2020; Gusain 2020.

⁶ *Palestine* is a non-fiction graphic novel by Joe Sacco, documenting his time spent in the West Bank and Gaza Strip between December 1991 and January 1992. Through his detailed illustrations and reportage, Sacco highlights both the collective history and the personal struggles of the Palestinian people. Cf. also Doughty 1998; Woo 2010, 166-177; Kozol 2011; Gadassik, Henstra 2012, 243-259.

⁷ According to Scott McCloud, the gutter engages the reader's active participation in constructing narrative

sound effects contribute tonal and auditory layers, while page composition and panel transitions, from moment-to-moment to scene-to-scene, control pacing and narrative logic. The declarative, exclamatory, thought-based speech balloons act as a metacommunicative layer, guiding tone and emotional inflection. Sound effects (*onomatopoeia*) introduce auditory simulation within the visual plane, blending sensory modalities. Page composition and panel transitions, which can be moment-to-moment, action-to-action, and scene-to-scene, dictate pacing and narrative logic⁸. Even though there is no single consensus on what constitutes a graphic novel, the term generally refers to a book-length work that uses the conventions of comics – panels, speech balloons, narrative captions – to tell a complex, self-contained story. Unlike comic book series, graphic novels typically aspire to thematic and formal coherence and often engage with mature or intellectually challenging content. The emergence of graphic novels as literary artefacts is inseparable from the legitimisation of comics in academic and critical discourse. In their pioneering work, scholars such as Scott McCloud (*Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*, 1993) and Thierry Groensteen (*The System of Comics*, 1999) provided the analytical tools for understanding the medium's grammar, drawing attention to its unique syntactic and semantic features:

I'm going to examine cartooning as a form of amplification through simplification. 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 that meaning in a way that realistic art can't. [...] Simplifying characters and images toward a purpose can be an effective tool for storytelling in any medium. Cartooning isn't just a way of drawing, it's a way of seeing. (McCloud 1993, 30)

In this context, graphic novels demand an active, critically engaged reader, capable of navigating the intricate interplay of textual and visual cues. Roland Barthes' (1970) distinction between "readerly" and "writerly" texts is particularly pertinent here. For Barthes, "readerly" texts present meaning in a relatively fixed, consumable form, whereas "writerly" texts invite readers to co-create meaning through an active process of interpretation. Graphic narratives align closely with the latter, given their multimodal structure. The reader is not merely absorbing information but weaving together layered visual and verbal signifiers into a cohesive and often personally inflected narrative experience. Reading a graphic novel is thus inherently a non-linear, recursive act. The simultaneity of text and image encourages the eye to move back and forth across the page, revisiting panels and reinterpreting visual clues considering new information. Recurrent visual motifs, shifts in colour palettes, changes in panel rhythm, and stylistic variations foster thematic cohesion while demanding ongoing readerly inference. In this way, graphic novels cultivate a heightened awareness of form and meaning, making them not only powerful artistic works but also effective pedagogical tools. In her study on the classroom use of Satrapi's *Persepolis* and Gene Luen Yang's *American Born Chinese* (2006), Hyunji Kwon (2020) illustrates how graphic narratives can engage students across multiple cognitive dimensions. The image-text interplay encourages students to explore complex topics such as cultural identity, diaspora, and historical trauma through a medium that demands interpretive richness rather than passive consumption. By resisting simplistic decoding and fostering multimodal

continuity. He argues that readers unconsciously bridge these visual gaps by drawing upon prior knowledge and contextual clues, effectively completing the sequence with inferred meaning (1993, 63-68). McCloud demonstrates that this interpretive act applies broadly – whether to playful interactions or more abstract sequences, such as a figure in motion – highlighting the reader's indispensable role in animating static images into coherent narrative flow.

⁸ For in-depth analysis of panel structure and page layout, cf. McCloud 1993; Groensteen 2007; Cohn 2013.

literacy, graphic novels offer a dynamic platform for developing critical thinking, empathy, and a deeper understanding of the multiplicity of lived experience.

One of the most defining features of graphic novels is their versatility. The art style can range from detailed realism to abstract or minimalist approaches, each serving to enhance the mood, setting, and emotional depth of the narrative. While some graphic novels employ vivid colours to evoke specific emotions, others use monochrome to underscore simplicity or dramatic tension: Spiegelman's *Maus* and Alan Moore and David Lloyd's *V for Vendetta* (1988-1989) use, for instance, stark black-and-white palettes to heighten their thematic gravity and socio-political resonance. Symbolism is another integral element, with imagery often layered with metaphors that add depth to the narrative beyond the literal text. Dialogue is presented in speech bubbles, allowing characters to express their thoughts and emotions, while narration boxes provide background information or internal monologues. Onomatopoeic sound effects like "BANG!" or "CRASH!" are woven into the artwork to heighten sensory immersion. This interplay of words and visuals allows for an innovative storytelling approach that engages readers on multiple levels. Panel layout and design are crucial for pacing and guiding the reader's journey. Panels may follow traditional grids or adopt dynamic, overlapping designs to influence the mood and rhythm of the story. Full-page illustrations, or splash pages, are often used for dramatic emphasis, while double-page spreads are reserved for expansive or action-packed scenes. The thoughtful layering of text, imagery, and additional elements like maps or documents creates a multidimensional storytelling structure.

The depiction of characters and their emotions is also central to the graphic novel format. Facial expressions, body language, and posture are used to convey subtle emotions and deepen the reader's connection to characters. As Stella Oh observes, "often, language lacks the ability to accurately articulate trauma, and images more effectively convey emotion and color the narrative" (2020, 76). Stylised character designs often reflect personalities and emotional states, adding to the narrative depth without relying solely on text. Themes and tone are enhanced through visual metaphors, atmospheric elements like lighting and shadows, and recurring motifs. Many graphic novels employ a non-linear storytelling, exploring flashbacks, fragmented timelines, and parallel narratives through creative panel arrangements and visual cues. This flexibility allows for layered, thought-provoking narratives that invite reader interpretation. The genre versatility of graphic novels further underscores their creative potential. The combination of visual and textual elements adds emotional depth while making graphic novels accessible to a broad audience, including those who might struggle with traditional prose formats due to language barriers, learning differences, or a preference for visual storytelling. The integration of images can aid comprehension, sustain attention, and provide contextual cues that support meaning-making beyond the written word.

2. *The Genealogy of Graphic Novels in Ireland*

The development of the graphic novel in Ireland reflects both global trends and distinct national concerns. While Irish comics have historically faced challenges in terms of distribution and cultural legitimacy, recent decades have witnessed a significant flourishing of the form. Early contributions were often overshadowed by British and American imports; however, the emergence of indigenous publishing houses and comic arts festivals, such as the Dublin Comic Arts Festival (DCAF), has enabled Irish creators to carve out a distinctive and vibrant space in the medium. As K.E. Wade (2020) notes, this local production often grapples with questions of identity, memory, and cultural autonomy within a post-colonial context and its formal evo-

lution is underpinned by deeper cultural roots. At the heart of Irish cultural history lies its oral storytelling tradition, where stories were preserved and transmitted by *seanchaithe* (traditional storytellers)⁹. These oral narratives, rich in descriptive imagery and rhythm, created immersive and emotionally resonant experiences for listeners.

Though often classified as a modern literary phenomenon, the Irish graphic narrative draws upon an artistic lineage that extends back centuries. The foundations of sequential art, a defining feature of graphic novels, can be traced to the illuminated manuscripts of medieval Ireland, most notably, the *Book of Kells*¹⁰, which takes its name from the location in County Meath, Ireland, where the abbey was founded in the early 9th century by monks from the Abbey of Iona¹¹. Now housed in the Library of Trinity College Dublin, and composed of meticulously illustrated texts that exemplify an early fusion of image and word to communicate complex religious and cultural narratives, the *Book of Kells* is considered the masterpiece of medieval Celtic art. Its richly decorated pages of the *Book of Kells*, far from being mere embellishments, functioned as narrative devices, enhancing the spiritual and didactic impact of the texts, much like the multimodal structure of graphic narratives today. Building on this visual-literary lineage, Irish mythology has emerged as a particularly rich narrative reservoir for graphic adaptation, and it has provided a fertile source for graphic adaptation, offering narratives rich in symbolic resonance and visual potential. Among these, *The Táin Bó Cúailnge* (*The Cattle Raid of Cooley*) stands as one of the most iconic and enduring tales. Traditionally situated in the 1st century during Ireland's pagan heroic age, *The Táin* is the central narrative of the Ulster Cycle, recounting the legendary conflict between Queen Medb of Connacht and the warriors of Ulster, led by the teenage hero Cú Chulainn. The story, sparked by Medb's desire to seize the prized Brown Bull of Cooley to equal her husband Ailill's wealth, embodies the tragic and heroic ideals of warrior culture through Cú Chulainn's supernatural feats and solitary defence of Ulster. Rooted in oral tradition and preserved in three principal written versions (found in manuscripts such as the *Book of Leinster* and *Lebor na hUidre* [*The Book of the Dun Cow*]), *The Táin* is composed in Old Irish, Middle Irish, and Early Modern Irish across different recensions. Rich in poetic language, mythic symbolism, and ritualized combat, the epic offers profound insight into the values of honour, loyalty, and fate in pre-Christian Irish society. Widely regarded as Ireland's national epic, it continues to inspire literary, visual, and performative reinterpretations, demonstrating its lasting influence on Irish cultural identity¹².

⁹ The word derives from the Old Irish term *seanchas*, meaning "old lore" or "tradition". *Seanchaithe* held a central role in early Irish society, where knowledge was transmitted primarily through oral means. They were responsible for preserving and recounting myths, legends, family genealogies, epic tales, and collective memory, keeping cultural identity alive through spoken word, often performed rhythmically or accompanied by music. They were not merely entertainers but respected custodians of knowledge, regarded as vital figures within the social and cultural structure of the clans. Their craft was passed down through generations with a strong emphasis on accuracy, and orality itself functioned as a living archive of shared history. For a more comprehensive analysis, cf. Mac Cana 1970; Ó hÓgáin 2006.

¹⁰ Created around the 9th century by Celtic monks, likely on the island of Iona or at Kells in Ireland, the manuscript contains the four Gospels of the New Testament, written in Latin and richly adorned with intricate decoration, interlace patterns, zoomorphic imagery, and Christian iconography. *The Book of Kells* is a masterpiece of insular art, a style that emerged in early medieval Ireland and Britain, blending Christian themes with native artistic traditions. Its ornamental complexity and spiritual symbolism reflect a devotion not only to scripture but also to the visual power of storytelling and sacred expression. Originally intended for liturgical use, the manuscript is now preserved at Trinity College Dublin, where it remains one of Ireland's greatest cultural treasures. For further reading, cf. Henry 1965; Meehan 1994; <<https://www.tcd.ie/library/research-collections/book-of-kells.php>> (05/2025).

¹¹ One of the Hebridean islands and home to one of the most important monastic communities in the region.

¹² For further reading, cf. Kinsella 1969; Gantz 1981.

From the 1970s onwards, mainstream comic publishers like the US-based Marvel and DC began referencing Celtic figures, such as Lir, the Dagda, and Nuada of the Silver Hand, into their stories, extending a trend that had already drawn heavily on Norse and Greco-Roman sources. Irish mythological references appeared in *Savage Tales Featuring Conan the Barbarian* (1974), featuring Dagda and Dian Cecht (the god of healing). Although Conan the Barbarian draws more heavily from broader Celtic and fantasy traditions, echoes of Irish mythology, such as the invocation of Crom (based loosely on Cromm Cruach, an ancient Irish deity associated with sacrifice), are also present. Following these appearances, individual figures from Irish mythology emerged in Marvel comics. Nuada of the Silver Hand, the first king of the Tuatha Dé Danann, made his debut in *Thor* #300 (1980) as a member of the Council of Godheads. In Irish legend, Nuada is renowned for his magical sword, the *Cliamb Solais* (*Sword of Light*) and his prosthetic silver arm. The Celtic gods were first introduced into Marvel's main continuity (Earth-616) in *The Mighty Thor* #386 (1987). In this issue, Thor pursues a monster through a portal into Avalon, Marvel's version of the Celtic Otherworld. There, he encounters Lir (later spelled *Leir*), originally the god of the sea in Irish and Welsh mythology. However, in the comics, Lir is reimagined as the "Lord of the Lightning" and the "God of the Spear" (both titles loosely connected to Irish mythological traditions). Subsequent issues, such as *The Mighty Thor* #398, expanded the Celtic pantheon further. In these stories, Lir joins forces with fellow Celtic deities, including the Dagda (*Eochaidh Ollathair*, the father of the Irish gods) and Caber (*Cairbre*, the son of Ogma, god of eloquence), to assist the Asgardians against external threats¹³. This reflects the enduring imaginative power of Irish legend, though often filtered through external lenses. Mischaracterisations persist across media, contributing to a long-standing pattern of cultural misrepresentation in popular entertainment.

This tendency towards misrepresentation has deeper historical roots. As Liam Burke, Ian Gordon, and Angela Ndalianis (2019) note, the depiction of Irish characters in comics often draws on entrenched stereotypes, inherited from Victorian caricatures portraying the Irish either as primitive and violent or as quaint and childlike. Such conventions, rooted in colonial narratives, have influenced portrayals in superhero comics from Banshee in Marvel's *X-Men* to various adaptations of Irish mythological figures, shaping global perceptions of Irish culture in ways that contemporary Irish creators now actively seek to challenge and revise (231-232). In contrast, the past two decades have seen the rise of independent Irish creators reclaiming these mythological traditions through the evolving medium of comics.

Enabled by digital tools and new distribution platforms, contemporary authors and artists are reworking both major cycles, like *An Lebor Gabála Éirenn* (*The Book of the Taking of Ireland*) and *The Táin*, and lesser-known figures from Irish lore. Irish author and publisher Colmán Ó Raghallaigh is well known for his pioneering role in developing Irish-language graphic novels. Through visually compelling and linguistically rich adaptations such as *An Sclábhaí* (1999; *The Slave*), *An Tóraigheacht* (2002; *The Hunt for Diarmuid and Gráinne*), *An Táin* (2006), and *Deirdre agus Mic Uisneigh* (2009; *Deirdre and the sons of Uisnech*), Ó Raghallaigh has contributed to revitalise Irish mythology for new generations of readers, while also advancing the use of Irish as a literary and artistic language within the graphic storytelling medium. Ó Raghallaigh has brought Irish mythological cycles to new audiences with strong cultural and linguistic grounding. *An Táin*, with illustrations by Barry Reynolds, presents a visual adaptation of the ancient epic *Táin Bó Cúailnge*, while Gerry Hunt's *Blood Upon the Rose* (2009), brings to life the events of the 1916 Easter Rising, reframing modern Irish history through sequential art, as noted by Morisson:

¹³ Cf. also de Beus 2022; *Irish Myths* 2021, <<https://irishmyths.com/2021/04/14/marvel-comics/>> (05/2025).

Gerry Hunt and his editors' choices of covers seemingly situate the two novels in a pro-Irish perspective. The subtitle for *Blood, The Rebellion that Set Ireland Free*, celebrates the 1916 Rising as a foundational moment in Irish history. In fact, historical comic strips, often based on the exemplary stories of great heroes or pivotal moments in national history, have often been vehicles for nationalist propaganda (Louwagie & Weyssow 11; see also Strömberg). Though they dramatise national history, Hunt's volumes nonetheless offer a multi-faceted account of the events. (2015, 115)

Gerry Hunt's *Blood Upon the Rose* adopts a more complex and nuanced perspective, avoiding simplistic heroization, and proving to be a work that resists reductive mythologisation to foreground the political ambiguities and human costs underlying national narratives. Together, these works highlight the medium's potential to preserve cultural memory and to re-imagine it for future generations.

Among the most notable contributions to Irish graphic storytelling are works that stand out for their artistic innovation, narrative depth, and cultural resonance. A key early figure in this space is Jim Fitzpatrick, whose *The Book of Conquest* (1978) appears as a lavishly illustrated volume that serves as a crucial precursor, although it is not a conventional graphic novel. Fitzpatrick continues his exploration in *The Silver Arm* (1981; serialized in the *Sunday Independent*), where he delves into the events surrounding the Second Battle of Mag Tuired, fought between the Túatha Dé Danann and the Fomóire. The title refers to the silver prosthesis given to Núada Aircetlám to replace the arm he lost during the First Battle of Mag Tuired. The primary source is the Middle Irish text *Cath Maige Tuired* (9th-11th century; *The Battle of Magh Tuireadh*), even if Fitzpatrick's book is by no means a faithful rendition, as he freely alters many details and invents entire episodes, which are not available in any of the traditional sources. The value of Fitzpatrick's graphic novel lies in its intricate knotwork and fantasy-inflected designs, which bring Irish mythology into the comic medium with striking visual flair¹⁴. This legacy was expanded with Pat Mills' *Sláine*, a fantasy comic series published in 1983 in the British magazine *2000 AD*, which reimagines the mythic hero Cú Chulainn in a world of barbaric grandeur, combining fantasy tropes with hyper-stylised visual dynamism. *Sláine* reconceives Cú Chulainn through a Conan-style antihero, combining *Lebor Gabála Éirenn* or *Leabhar Gabhála na hÉireann* (The Book of the taking of Ireland), with comic-book spectacle. The series follows the barbarian warrior *Sláine Mac Roth*, a wielder of the axe "Brainbiter", who possesses the magical "warp-spasm", a monstrous battle frenzy drawn from ancient myth. Accompanied by his cunning dwarf companion Ukko, *Sláine* battles foes such as the Fomorians, sky chariots, and ancient gods, ultimately becoming the first High King of Ireland. The story draws heavily from Irish mythology, especially the Ulster Cycle, blending figures like Danu, Crom Cruach, and the Fomorians with European prehistoric beliefs and some Norse and Babylonian influences. *Sláine*'s world fuses ancient pagan spirituality with speculative fantasy elements, reflecting both historical myth and imaginative reinterpretation. The series continues to this day, featuring various artists and visual styles, and it remains one of the most enduring graphic representations of Irish myth (Mills 2021).

In a markedly different tone, Paddy Brown's webcomic *The Cattle Raid of Cooley* (2008-2015) offers a realistic and historically sensitive retelling of the *Táin*, grounded in psychological

¹⁴ For a broader understanding of Irish comics and their engagement with mythology, cf. *The Superhero Symbol: Media, Culture, and Politics* (2019) by Liam Burke, Ian Gordon, and Angela Ndalians, which discusses the portrayal of Irish mythology and prehistory in graphic storytelling. Additionally, Jack Fennell's *Rough Beasts: The Monstrous in Irish Fiction, 1800-2000* (2019) offers insights into the depiction of Irish myths in literature and could provide contextual background relevant to Fitzpatrick's work.

nuance and tribal politics, rather than supernatural spectacle. The same myth has also been reinterpreted from a contemporary and humorous angle in M.K. Reed's *About a Bull* (2011-2012), which uses simplified, vibrant visuals and a feminist framing centred on Queen Meabh to make the epic accessible and resonant for diverse audiences. More recent works include Will Sliney's *The Legend of Cú Chulainn* (2013)¹⁵, published by The O'Brien Press, which embraces a heroic-fantasy aesthetic influenced by American comics, and Rob Curley's *The League of Volunteers* (2011-), which blends mythological figures with 20th-century nationalist fiction, casting Fionn mac Cumhaill and Lúgh Lamhfada as part of a superhero team defending mid-century Ireland. One notable outlier is Leann Hamilton's *Finn & Fish* (2010-2014), which stands out as a fresh, comedic adaptation of the Salmon of Knowledge myth drawing from the Fenian Cycle, instead of the more commonly referenced Ulster Cycle or mythological invasions.

In addition to historical and mythological retellings, contemporary Irish comics have become platforms for socially engaged and personal narratives. Artists such as Sarah Bowie¹⁶ and Debbie Jenkinson have brought intimate stories to the forefront of Irish graphic storytelling. Through subtle visual cues and a narrative voice rooted in emotional authenticity, their works connect readers to modern Irish identity, while navigating themes of alienation and belonging. Taken together, these works underscore the unique compatibility between myth and graphic storytelling, and how the latter offers Irish creators a space for both cultural recovery and creative innovation. Freed from the constraints of mass-market publishing, and empowered by digital tools, contemporary Irish graphic narratives are no longer just responding to mythological clichés, they are reshaping the myth itself.

3. Midlands

Midlands (2023) is a self-published graphic novel by Irish comic artist, illustrator, and author Debbie Jenkinson. Beyond its narrative, *Midlands* witnesses Ireland's vibrant self-publishing scene. It was first stocked at Little Deer Comics in Stoneybatter, a key hub for Irish independent comics. As Promotions Officer at Illustrators Ireland and co-founder of The Comics Lab, Jenkinson has been instrumental in building platforms for Irish sequential art, helping establish initiatives like Ireland's Graphic Short Prize, in collaboration with *The Irish Times*. Her career is deeply invested in fostering a space for personal, grounded storytelling in the medium of comics. Jenkinson's creative trajectory has always been anchored in the lived experiences of ordinary people. Her debut long-form comic, *Remorse* (2015), depicts the psychological stagnation of a young woman stuck in a call-centre job, capturing the quiet despair and alienation of post-Celtic Tiger Ireland. Through repetitive visual motifs and a muted colour palette, Jenkinson conveys the protagonist's sense of paralysis and emotional fatigue with subtlety and precision. In *Ghosting* (2020), a romantic mystery set on an Irish bus route, she explores fleeting connections and emotional ambiguity, using fragmented storytelling and

¹⁵ Though it introduces some changes to the original legend, *The Legend of Cú Chulainn* remains a compelling example of myth retold for modern audiences, blending visual spectacle with narrative clarity.

¹⁶ Sarah Bowie is an author and illustrator based in Waterford City, Ireland. Since 2015, she has published three children's books, with a fourth title, *Kevi's In A Mood*. Her short stories and illustrations have also appeared in *The Guardian* and *The Irish Times*. She is the co-founder of The Comics Lab, a creative space dedicated to exploring visual storytelling, and helped establish Ireland's first Graphic Short Story Prize in partnership with *The Irish Times*. Her clients include *The Guardian*, *The Irish Times*, *The O'Brien Press*, *Little Island*, *RTE Player*, *Irish Design*, and *MS Readathon*.

soft, sketch-like visuals to mirror the transience of modern-day relationships. Jenkinson's style often blends formal experimentation with emotional intimacy, focusing on the inner lives of women in everyday, urban Irish settings. Her sensitivity to body language, silence, and interior monologue marks her contribution as emblematic of a strand in Irish graphic storytelling that prioritises lived experience and social realism over spectacle.

The story narrated in *Midlands* centres on Veronica (Ronnie) Fox, a Dublin pharmacist who relocates to Mullingar, in the Irish Midlands, after her mother's death, and the latter's cryptic parting words addressed to her daughter: "Look for your father, won't you?" (2023, 14), propelling her into a reluctant exploration of family secrets and buried histories. The story soon unfolds into a layered psychological journey of grief, identity, and belonging. Ronnie's life is charged with internal tension, though structured by mundane rhythms, including chatting with customers, helping colleagues, or scrolling through DNA test results. The narrative is balanced between opposite tensions, and it evolves into a subtle accumulation of quiet, observational moments – a cat crossing the road, a garden grotto, the frayed tassel of a car key, the lean of a gate left ajar by time and weather – and the protagonist's attempt to navigate a space geographically close yet emotionally remote, in a setting that does not feel like home. Far from being incidental, these contrasting fragments form the emotional architecture of the narrative. For instance, the soft yellow glow of a bungalow window carries as much narrative weight as any spoken line, signalling comfort, estrangement, or ambivalence depending on context. Jenkinson also weaves naturalistic dialogue with interior reflection, allowing mundane exchanges to resonate with psychological depth. Several dialogues, such as "Never trust a fella with a ponytail!" (15) or "You're no craic" (57) resonate not simply for their colloquial charm, but because they echo the cadences and undercurrents of lived Irish experience.

This attention to tonal nuance and ambient detail situates *Midlands* within a graphic tradition that privileges emotional realism and socio-cultural specificity, aligning more with literary fiction than conventional graphic genres. As Chute suggests, comics operate through "an intricately layered narrative language" (2006, 767), one where verbal and visual cues do not merely coexist but co-produce meaning. In *Midlands*, this is evident in how visual motifs, such as windows, thresholds, and fading photographs, interact with Ronnie's interior monologue, creating a dialogue between text and image that deepens the story's psychological and emotional resonance. What elevates *Midlands* beyond slice-of-life storytelling is its persistent engagement with the theme of inheritance – genetic, emotional, and cultural. As DNA matches and old photos begin to surface, so too does a growing sense of estrangement, from her past, from the version of herself she once believed in, and from the place she now inhabits ("I don't know who I am anymore", 57). Ronnie's journey is not just about locating a biological parent ("So yeah. My father is not my father", Jenkinson 2023, 56), but about reckoning with the implications of being from somewhere, carrying someone else's memory, or absence ("They lied to me my whole life", 56). This sense of dislocation is mirrored by the setting itself. The geographical setting of the Irish Midlands becomes a metaphor for the in-between, a space neither fully home nor entirely alien, which holds estrangement and possibility. *Midlands* is deeply grounded in character, place, and class. The story pays attention to working-class environments, with lovingly rendered details: the textures of shops, signage, tiles, and worn surfaces are rendered with care and specificity, grounding the emotional narrative in a vividly material world. These visual moments are never simply decorative. They offer a tactile, almost cinematic sense of atmosphere. The people in the book, who populate the town of Mullingar, are depicted as strong as the places they inhabit. As observed by Oh, in graphic narratives the archive of memory often unfolds through the mapping of bodies: individual, communal, and

national (2020, 79). This cartographic impulse suggests what Name Duong describes as “trans-national sites that symbolize both absence and presence” in the repositories of memory (2016, 66). While geographically distant or historically transformed, these spaces remain emotionally and symbolically alive through personal and collective remembrance. Similarly, in *Midlands*, Jenkinson renders memory as a layered landscape, where places are not fixed backdrops but emotionally charged terrains marked by what has been lost and what continues to endure.

At the level of visual style, *Midlands* reflects both a refinement and a tension in Jenkinson's artistic approach. Known for her expressive pencil work and observational detail, here she embraces a softer, layered aesthetic. Her pencil work, even when mediated by digital tools, retains the autographic quality that Hillary Chute identifies as central to the graphic narrative form, where “the mark of handwriting” itself becomes part of the story's emotional texture (2006, 767). The drawings are lush and textured, at times delicate, evoking an ink-wash feel that adds warmth and emotional depth. At the same time, certain formal choices signal a shift toward a more digitally inflected surface. The lettering feels very digital, and the frames appear slightly stiff in places, perhaps due to the artificial digital overlay used in self-publishing. Some gradients, textures, or panel layouts create a digital façade that makes the scenes feel slightly less “lived in”. These elements do not diminish the beauty of the work. On the contrary, they reflect a conscious negotiation between handmade intimacy and contemporary production methods. Slight irregularities, like lettering that occasionally slips outside the panel borders, seem less like oversights and more like expressive choices, revealing an urgency in the storytelling process. This visual looseness resists the polish of commercial comics, allowing emotion and imperfection to surface in ways that feel personal and direct. Jenkinson's command of atmosphere is omnipresent. The colouring, likely done with pencil, provides beautiful tonal moments that enrich the emotional resonance of each scene. These visual decisions align with Jenkinson's thematic focus on the ordinary. As she herself puts it, “The exciting stuff in life is probably only 5 per cent. The rest of the time we're just drinking tea or going about the day”¹⁷. Indeed, her interest lies in the 95 per cent, which is populated by the small interactions, the quiet gestures, the negative space between one moment and the next. This sensibility permeates *Midlands*, aligning with the Japanese concept of *ma*, namely, negative space as emotional presence¹⁸. This aesthetic of stillness not only creates visual poetry but also allows space for affect to accumulate. The emphasis on silence, gesture, and atmospheric pauses in *Midlands* resonates with the Japanese aesthetic concept of *ma*, a notion of “negative space” that signifies not emptiness but potential, emotional resonance, and relational energy. By incorporating *ma*, Jenkinson's narrative rhythm privileges what is unsaid or unseen, allowing emotional meaning to arise organically between panels. By inviting the reader to inhabit pauses, glances, or the quietness between actions, Jenkinson foregrounds emotional presence over narrative momentum. In these silent panels, memory and anticipation often coexist, mirroring the temporal fragmentation of grief, or unresolved longing. Panels linger on moments of silence or pause. The result is a rhythm of reading that mirrors that of Ronnie's emotional life: slow, uncertain, interrupted by memory or unexpected connection. The narrative is also

¹⁷ <<https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/2024/03/23/comic-artist-debbie-jenkinson-i-like-the-idea-that-youre-looking-over-dublin-and-could-pick-out-anyones-story/>> (05/2025).

¹⁸ “In modern interpretations of Japanese art and culture, *ma* refers to the meaningful use of empty space—an intentional gap that holds as much weight as the surrounding elements. Rather than absence, *ma* is perceived as presence: a space charged with potential and awareness. It is not limited to visible voids but includes the sensed intervals between forms or actions. Often described as ‘the silence between the notes that makes the music’, *ma* embodies the idea that what is not shown can be just as powerful as what is” (Karlgrén 1974 [1923]).

marked by its episodic, month-by-month structure, which subtly charts Ronnie's emotional arc, from displacement and denial to confrontation and fragile acceptance. The revelation of her biological origins, when it arrives, is neither cathartic nor shattering; but rather, it simply deepens the complexity of her identity. This turning point unfolds quietly during/in the course of a mundane conversation, precisely in line with the book's refusal of melodrama. There is no dramatic confrontation; instead, the discovery emerges through tone, subtext, and bodily cues. Jenkinson avoids sensationalism, allowing the emotional impact to register in the silences that follow, not the revelation itself. Learning that the man who raised her might not be her father does not bring closure but rather invites introspection. The story's emotional core is captured in the final reflection:

Wherever you go, they say, there you are, and sooner or later comes a time in all of our lives when we must stop looking back, or forward, or to the horizon, be where we are and love what is. All this to say, apologies to the perfectly fine town of Mullingar, which has been selected randomly as a backdrop for Ronnie's restlessness. (Jenkinson 2023, 87)

This quote encapsulates a key emotional movement within *Midlands*, namely, the struggle between restlessness and acceptance. The narrator's ironic apology to Mullingar, described as a "perfectly fine town" yet chosen as the setting for Ronnie's unease, highlights that the protagonist's dissatisfaction is less about external circumstances than it is about an internal disquiet. The town becomes a symbolic landscape, a random yet inevitable stage for Ronnie's existential tension. This passage reflects the idea that true stasis is not geographical but psychological, in that no matter where one moves, one cannot escape oneself. The impulse to look backward toward memory, forward toward fantasy, or outward toward other possibilities ultimately deflects from the challenge of inhabiting the present. *Midlands* thus subtly portrays how the self and places become entangled, each mirroring the other's inertia or potential movement. In this sense, Ronnie's restlessness in Mullingar resonates with the Joycean concept of paralysis, a condition where characters feel trapped within the banalities and constraints of their everyday lives. Similarly, in *Midlands*, Mullingar serves not as a site of adventure or change, but as a mirror of internal immobility, capturing the dissonance between the desire for escape and the burden of rootedness. Just as Joyce's *Dubliners* (1914) are immobilized by the weight of their own histories and the suffocation of their environments, so too does Ronnie's struggle embody a quiet, deeply Irish tension between belonging and dislocation.

Unlike other Irish graphic novels that skilfully pay homage to Celtic mythology as a living tradition or commemorate the more tragic chapters of Irish history, Jenkinson's comics turn their focus to the small triumphs and quiet frustrations of ordinary life. Failed romances, overfed cats, and the inner worlds of office workers recur throughout her stories¹⁹. As Jenkinson herself admits in an interview:

My interest is in telling stories about ordinary people – the untold stories about unsung heroes. This is about a pharmacist from Dublin who somehow ends up living in a town in the Irish midlands, how she solves the mystery of her family and finds her place in the world. The comic format lends itself so well to these stories, having the power to depict the real moments that constitute our lives.²⁰

¹⁹ Works like *Remorse* – a long-form comic about a girl trapped for ten years in a call centre job, or *Ghosting*, another tale of romantic misadventure set in Dublin, illustrate her commitment to portraying the everyday with nuance, wit, and emotional honesty.

²⁰ Cf. <<https://worldillustrationawards.com/projects/debbie-jenkinson-midlands/>> (05/2025).

4. Conclusion

Graphic narrative merges the immediacy of visual storytelling with the structural depth of literary fiction. Its evolution from the margins of popular culture to a recognised medium of artistic and intellectual expression reflects what Hillary Chute describes as the genre's unique capacity to convey meaning through the interplay of image and text, allowing for both emotional resonance and narrative complexity:

Comics might be defined as a hybrid word-and-image form in which two narrative tracks, one verbal and one visual, register temporality spatially. Comics moves forward in time through the space of the page, through its progressive counter point of presence and absence: packed panels (also called frames) alternating with gutters (empty spaces). (2008, 452)

As she notes, the graphic novel “offers an intricately layered narrative language – the language of comics – that comprises the verbal, the visual, and the way these two representational modes interact on a page” (Chute, DeKoven, 2006, 767). Will Eisner further observes how meaning often resides in “what happens between the panels” (1985, 38), as the emotional arc unfolds precisely in those quiet interstices. In this way, Jenkinson's contribution does not break from literary tradition but extends it. Her graphic narrative reflects what Thierry Groensteen terms a *comic arthrology*, that is, the network of “relationships of position, contiguity, and intensity” (2013, 12), where every visual choice contributes to the emotional resonance and narrative rhythm of the work. This intricate visual architecture ultimately serves the broader thematic purpose of capturing the shifting nature of identity and belonging. *Midlands* is concerned with inhabiting the uncertainty inherent in belonging and acknowledging identity as a dynamic and evolving construct. Jenkinson's work reimagines the Irish Midlands not as a passive backdrop, but as an emotionally charged landscape that shapes and mirrors her protagonist's inner journey. The delicate pencil work, balanced use of gesture and negative space, and layered textures invite a contemplative reading experience that foregrounds tone over action²¹, while her careful modulation of light and shadow further enhances the emotional landscape of *Midlands*. Soft gradations of grey evoke both physical and psychological spaces of uncertainty, while stark contrasts between light and darkness mirror the protagonist's oscillations between revelation and disorientation, reinforcing the graphic novel's meditative tone. The ability to experience each panel sequentially while simultaneously absorbing the page enables a mode of reading that makes visible the subtle emotional undercurrents of estrangement and loss. Through delicate shading and careful modulation of light and shadow, Jenkinson stains key emotional moments with a quiet, tactile weight. In *Midlands*, tonal shifts (from airy, light-infused spaces to oppressive, shadowed interiors) produce a haptic sense of dislocation and memory, signalling both the aching persistence of the past and the tentative openings toward renewal.

Through a carefully constructed visual grammar of line work, tonal shading, and panel arrangement, *Midlands* similarly builds meaning through the interrelations of its compositional elements. As Jenkinson reflects on her process:

²¹ Jenkinson's process reflects this tactile quality: “[c]oloured pencils on paper, scanned, with text and some lines applied digitally afterwards. The pages and cover were compiled in InDesign” (<<https://worldillustrationawards.com/projects/debbie-jenkinson-midlands/>>, 05/2025). The hand-drawn softness, later subtly integrated with digital tools, reinforces the emotional and aesthetic intimacy of *Midlands*.

My illustrations appear throughout; the book, page design, and writing are by me. The way picture and text work together in the comic format is magic to me, how you can move from drama to quiet moments so seamlessly, the power it offers to trigger empathy in the reader, the way the creator can slow the reader down to observe a gate swinging on its hinges, a cat lying in the sun.²²

Midlands broadens the scope of Irish literary expression, demonstrating the potential of graphic narrative to articulate lived experience in both intimate and expansive terms. Part of an ecosystem of grassroots support, collaboration, and creative autonomy, *Midlands* is both a personal story and a community achievement. It reflects Jenkinson's deepening artistic voice, and the strength of an alternative comics scene committed to storytelling that values nuance, intimacy, and realism. Ultimately, her work affirms the graphic novel's ability to hold complex, everyday experiences with care and clarity. It invites us to read slowly, to notice the mundane, and to recognize that the most meaningful stories are often the smallest ones:

For blow-ins and unsung heroes everywhere. (Jenkison 2023, 2)

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²² Cf. <<https://worldillustrationawards.com/projects/debbie-jenkinson-midlands/>> (05/2025).

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