

My Life Is an Open Book: D.I.Y. Autobiography

Part of the underground movement established in the punk cultures of the 1970s, zines developed as an outlet for those on the outside of mainstream culture to express themselves. Zines continued to be significant forms of expression in the punk cultures of the 1980s and 1990s; today zines provide an important platform for authors — or ‘zinesters’ — working within a distinct genre.

Zines are typically self-published, which allows for a broad range of topics, uncensored accounts, and self-expression generally not found in edited and commercially-packaged publications. Politics, music, and autobiography are standard topics. ‘Perzines’ (personal + zine), as autobiographical zines are known, form an increasingly large percentage of contemporary zine publishing.

Women zinesters became prominent in the 1990s as part of a feminist punk rock subculture known as riot grrrl; women continue to be an integral voice in the zine community. Drawn from a developing collection housed in the Special Collections Research Center, the zines on display in this exhibition are primarily perzines produced by women, representing the 1990s to the present day. Topics range from extremely frank accounts of physical and psychological trauma to playful pictographic series. Additional materials outside the zine genre have been selected to provide some historical context to these do-it-yourself autobiographical works.

This exhibition appears concurrently with two Chicago zine-related events. On March 8-9, 2013, the fourth annual Chicago Zine Fest takes place at Columbia College Chicago. And on April 6, 2013, the Caxton Club/Newberry Library Symposium on the Book presents “OUTSIDERS: Zines, *Samizdat*, and Alternative Publishing,” exploring the world of the alternative press with experts from around the country.

My Life is an Open Book: DIY Autobiography was curated by Sarah G. Wenzel, Bibliographer for Literatures of Europe & the Americas. A web exhibit based on *My Life is an Open Book* is available at <http://www.lib.uchicago.edu/e/webexhibits/mylifeisanopenbook>.

Creating the Physical Object

The physical object gives form and context to the words and images, reflecting the author’s personal aesthetic as well as practical concerns such as cost and methods of production. Zines are usually assembled and finished by hand; each copy is unique.

Zines in a series

Many zines are published as part of a numbered sequence, although Number 1 can often be both the first and last issue. Those that persist, however regularly or irregularly, change over time as the authors themselves change.

To See Ourselves as Others See Us

Autobiography provides a chance to explore, reflect on, and project the ways in which you see yourself and how you believe others see you. Where body image and gender identity are contested and fluid, zines offer a supportive (and sometimes anonymous) space for discussion and experimentation.

Life Writing

Telling a narrative story of your life can take many shapes and forms. In these instances, authors recount particular significant events through words and images. Unlike contemporary conventional autobiography, the authors use a conversational tone and self-publish for a small readership, primarily friends and family.

Family Ties

Relationships to the family often throw the character of the writer into high relief. Sometimes it is as direct as *V-Reject* author Sin's celebration of publishing her first zine not censored by her mother. Other times it is more reflective, as in Haven's writing about her father's wartime experiences.

Authors

Chicago zinesters Mucha and Runk, who have developed signature voices and styles, are examples of authors working in a variety of formats over time. For example, Mucha continues to publish zines even as she gathers her earlier work into formally published books.

Corinne Mucha

The first comics I ever made were diary comics, when I was in college. Since then I've been very interested in using events in my life as a starting point for my work.

I like to look at real life events in the same way a 3-D artist might consider reused materials for their art. I look at stories as a found object- something I can manipulate and disguise in order to make something new. How can I change aspects of an event while maintaining the basic truth? What happens when I string a few separate stories together- how do they change each other? How do the smaller events in my life relate to bigger ideas? What happens if I throw in some mermaids and unicorns? These are all things I am trying to explore through my comics when I write about my life.

While my work may still have some "tell-all" qualities, I'm not really interested in the confessional nature of autobio comics. Writing stories about your life is another way of taking control of them. It's an opportunity to reveal things as much as it is to hide them. It's another kind of magic trick- an old tire torn apart, twisted up to look like a snake. It's not a tire anymore, but it's not really a snake either. It's something else entirely, and whatever personal experiences the reader brings to the table can help make it something new.

Marian Runk

I find memoir and comics to be useful genres with which to explore the intersection of individual and community narratives. I am interested in the power of the specific to indicate the universal, and I frequently return to personal narrative in part because of the immediacy of the "I." Similarly, I am drawn to incorporate cartooning—essentially a process of simplification and reduction—into my work. As the details of a face or environment are reduced, so the opportunity of the viewer to identify with a character or locale may increase. I seek to further bridge the distance between my work and diverse audiences by focusing on the basic unit of one person relating to another, which when multiplied and placed into context, begins to get at the narrative of a place or community. I rely on these strategies, along with a frequent use of humor, to encourage dialogue about subjects that lie at the fringe of everyday

conversation. Whether by aversion or affinity, I hope to move my audience beyond mere visual pleasure and into the realm of emotional and critical engagement.

Shifting boundaries

Zines are an incredibly creative and boundary-blurring genre. They frequently mix media and inspire new types of publications. These are a few of the most notable in the Regenstein Library's collections.

Wordless

Depending on the author or artist, some zines may rely primarily on images to convey the story, while others focus more on the text.