Comics after Cancer
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Over the last several years, I have been looking at the depiction of cancer in comic books and graphic novels. This growing body of cancer narratives has, interestingly, fallen into certain patterns that I have discussed at various conferences and lectures. First, these ‘cancer comics’ tend to fall into loose categories: the Fictive, the Familial, the Experiential, and the Clinical. Next, many of these accounts include an instance of diagnosis deafness, when most senses are shown as falling away as the characters receive a doctor’s determination of their illness. And, I have theorized that the comics medium itself is dysoncological in nature, providing a discrete and safe bordered recount of a disease that, in essence, runs unchecked and border-defying within the body.

Today, I want to briefly discuss another observation that has arisen as I study this corpus, namely the evolving placement of what I call the cancer climax and its ensuing denouement within these comics. This term is meant as, in the narrative, the building culmination of the illness to a narrative point at which either the ill or the illness finally succumbs; the cancer climax is not necessarily synonymous with the overall narrative climax or peak of the story. Creators might place it at a separate point in their works to impart a different value to the illness rather than the central conflict. Over the past forty years, the placement of this cancer climax has shifted, largely moving from the very end of the work to a place earlier in the narrative. As a result, more events following either a demise or a remission fill the stories, suggesting more to life after cancer.

Starting as far back as The Death of Captain Marvel in 1982, the few self-contained cancer comics (i.e. published as stand-alone or collected works rather than open-ended series) produced through 2009 usually only had an average of 5% of the total page count remaining following the cancer climax. These were short, fixed denouements, implying there was little left to cover of the cancer experience. Beginning with 2009’s Stitches, however, these segments grew greatly in length, expanding to over 15% of the total narrative. For instance, the 2020 Kimiko Does Cancer has over a third of its content following the cancer climax, staying with the main character well after her breast cancer procedure and into her life beyond the immediate medical crisis. The 2021 Dancing at the Pity Party has over half of its material focused on missing and mourning for a departed loved one, rather than concluding it suddenly upon their demise.

In summary, this shift of the cancer climax suggests an evolving relationship between comics creators and the subject of cancer. This is not a static sub-genre of graphic medicine but, instead, one that finds new utility in each creator’s unique chronicle of the disease. There is, in short, still more to be learned from each iteration of cancer comic, as it remains a rich and telling examination within the overall field.

- A. David Lewis