

HOAX

Psychosis Blues

For Rob

Book number _____ of 1000

First Edition

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HOAX

Psychosis Blues

Ravi Thornton

Introduction by Dr Matthew J. A. Green

Year illustrations by Leonardo M. Giron

Poem illustrations by Hannah Berry, Karrie
Fransman, Julian Hanshaw, Rozi Hathaway, Rian
Hughes, Rhiana Jade, Ian Jones, Mark Stafford
and Bryan Talbot

Design by Wayne Marsden



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Psychosis Blues

Introduction by Dr Matthew J. A. Green

'Graphic novel performance reading.' So ran the subject line that introduced me to the fearsomely talented Ravi Thornton back in the summer of 2012. That fateful email was prompted by Stephen L. Holland, co-proprietor of my local comics shop, Page 45, who figured I might be interested in arranging a Nottingham reading of Thornton's debut graphic novel, *The Tale of Brin & Bent and Minno Marylebone*. He was right. And while the stars were against us on that occasion, bigger things were yet to come.

Even as the haunting performances of *Brin & Bent* were stunning audiences in Bristol and London, Thornton was drawing together the collective magics of an internationally renowned creative team capable of giving life to the unprecedented artistic accomplishment that is *HOAX*. One part dark musical, one part graphic novel, *HOAX* combines electronic folk, physical theatre, poetry and sequential art to tell the harrowing story of a young man, Rob, struggling with a mental illness that would, in his thirty-first year, prove fatal.

HOAX My Lonely Heart dramatises the violence and heartbreak of a couple haunted by the spectre of undiagnosed schizophrenia. Thornton's deeply moving script and lyrics combine with the stagecraft of acclaimed director Benji Reid and the evocative music of Minute Taker to tell of the vicissitudes of romantic love in a three-way relationship where the mental illness acquires a ghostly presence all of its own. *HOAX Psychosis Blues*, meanwhile, draws on the talents of ten commended illustrators, both well-established artists and relative newcomers, who gorgeously and distinctively render the multiple mental worlds of a post-relationship (and post-diagnosis) Rob. These sections range from the abstract and symbolic interpretations of poetic cartographies to stylised renditions of a world recognisably close to everyday life.

Whereas Thornton's first graphic novel was forged in the pain of her own personal trauma, both the book you hold in your hands and the companion performance have grown out of the life story and the poetry of her younger brother, Roabbi. During his life Roabbi wrote a large number of poems

and, upon his death, Thornton became the custodian of this literary legacy. Many of these pieces had been created in consultation and collaboration with Thornton, and in life it had been Roabbi's dream to have his work in print. In reworking these poems as a graphic novel, Thornton has helped realise this dream and, in doing so, created a living testament to his memory.

But what *HOAX* gives us is anything but a straight piece of memoir. Like *Brin & Bent*, *Psychosis Blues* transforms incidents from one person's life into a series of metaphors that convey an emotional truth freed from the constraints of the literal. At its best, literature and fine art suffuse the particular beauties and brutalities of individual lives with the tincture of universality, touching us in ways that mystics and magicians describe as transcendental. Despite having the flavour of myth and utilising a symbolism that approaches the sacred, however, Thornton's writing refuses to relinquish its hold on the here and now. Her work opens up other worlds for us to enter, but it is not otherworldly. These are places we can go not to escape from, but to be confronted by aspects of existence we often refuse to acknowledge in our waking lives.

Visually and verbally, *Psychosis Blues* draws on a range of artistic genres and traditions. Foremost among these are various iterations of Speculative Fiction: the Gothic, Science Fiction and Fantasy. It is no surprise, then, that many of the artists here are renowned for their contributions to, and indeed pioneering work in, these areas. But even the most surreal sections of the graphic novel retain a social edge, whilst Leonardo M. Giron's biographical interludes of Ravi, Rob and Manchester ultimately reveal a magical realism at their heart.

Most histories of the genre trace modern comics back to nineteenth-century satirical magazines like *Punch*, which themselves developed out of an eighteenth-century print culture dominated by the caricature of Hogarth, Gillray, Cruikshank and Rowlandson. But there is a lesser known aspect of this same tradition with a penchant for the visionary, which finds contemporary expression in graphic novels like Bryan Talbot's Luther Arkwright books and Alan Moore's *Promethea*. This is an artistic genealogy stretching back to

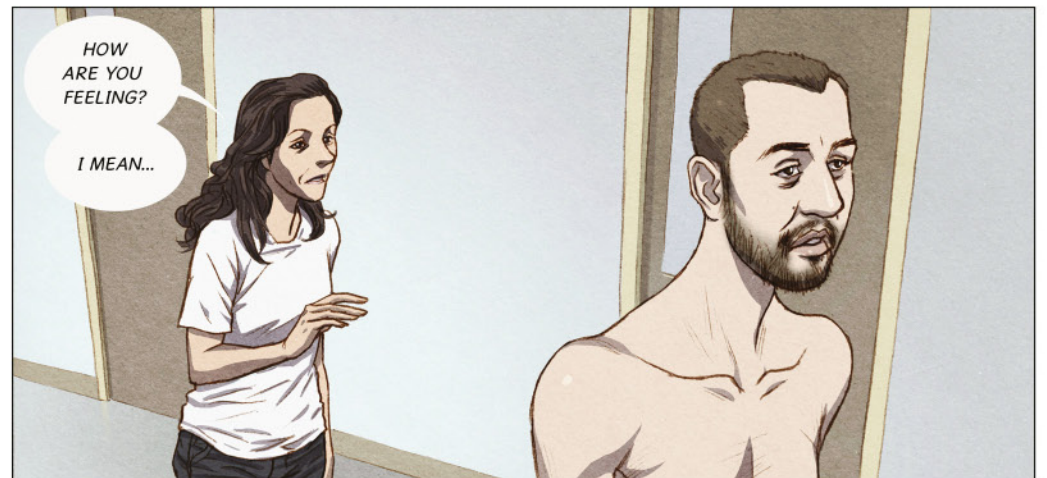
the composite art of William Blake. Blake's illuminated books, which critique cultural attitudes that still dominate global political and economic systems, have become a cornerstone of this counterculture. Blake's uncompromising depictions of trauma, his self-reflexive inclusion of himself, his wife, friends, and environment within an alternative mythology likewise anticipates the way that Thornton's works suffuse our waking worlds with the stuff of dreams.

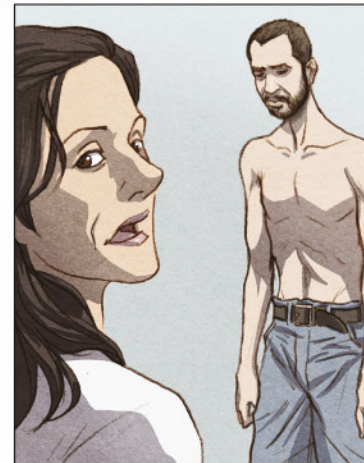
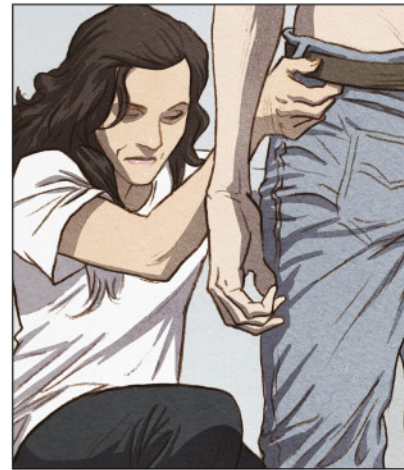
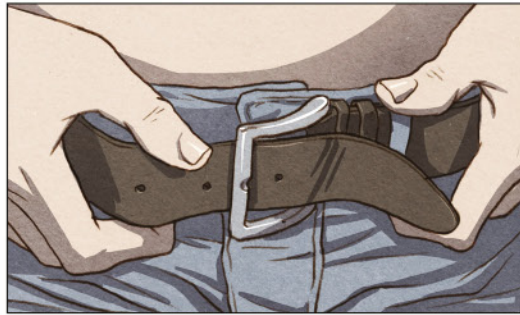
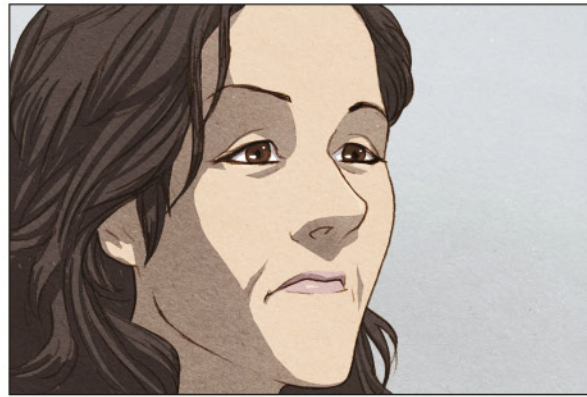
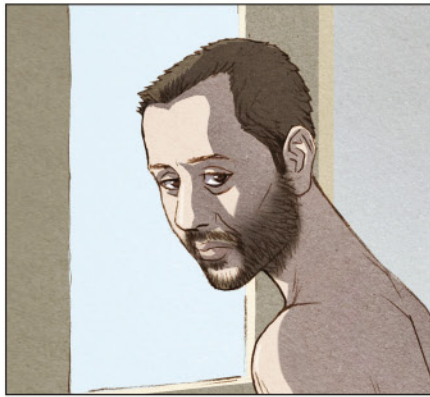
Though Blake has not been a direct source for Thornton, this Blakean dimension of her work helps us to understand its position within the field of Graphic Medicine. In its unflinching depictions of Rob's struggles with schizophrenia, *HOAX* clearly engages with mental health issues. It is fair to say that, despite reasonably complimentary depictions of ward staff, the medical institution and the culture that gives rise to it do not come off looking particularly helpful. Indeed, Mark Stafford's depiction of Rob's early committal to psychiatric care conveys the same profound sense of horror and paranoia that Stafford has brought to illustrations of H.P. Lovecraft. As readers, we are aware that these images represent delusions derived in part from Rob's illness, but the sense that something remains amiss in the way our culture treats the mentally ill persists throughout the narrative. Without robbing Rob of responsibility, *Psychosis Blues* clearly contextualises the decisions he finds himself making within a wider set of cultural practices — economic, political and medical — that call out for attention.

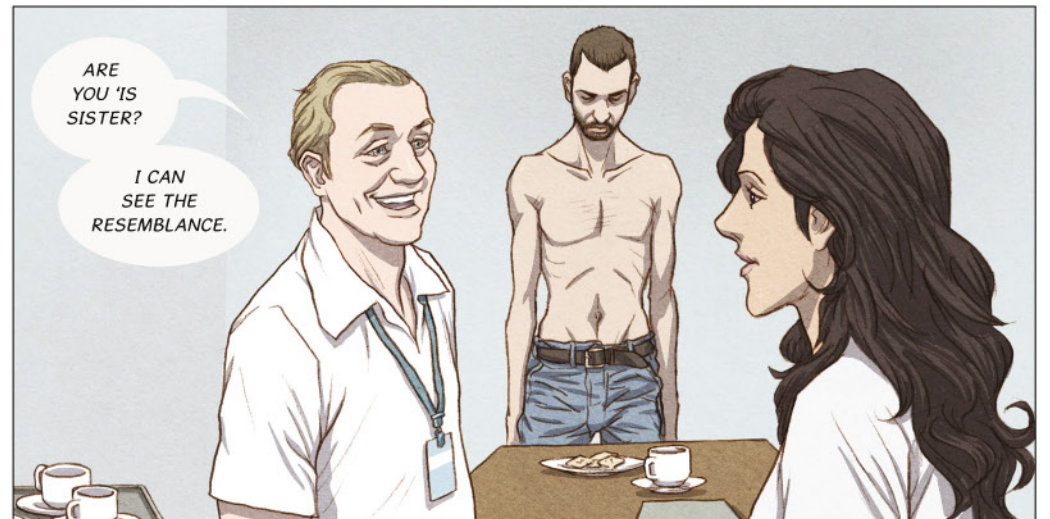
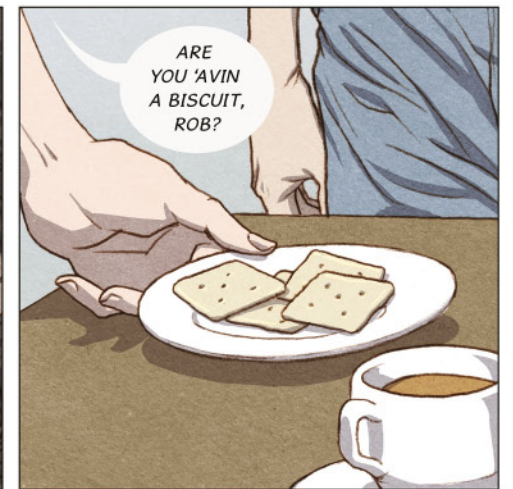
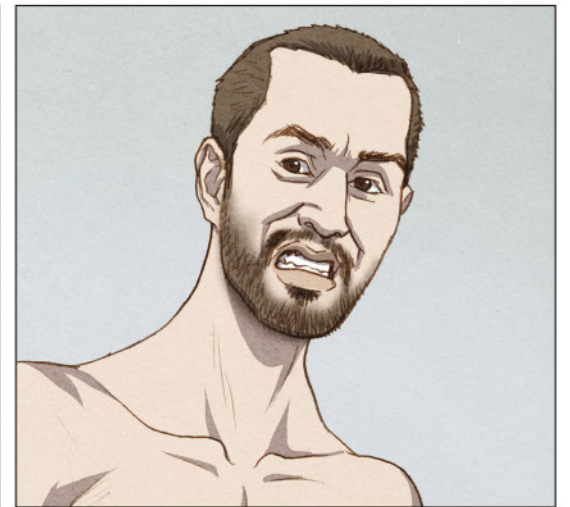
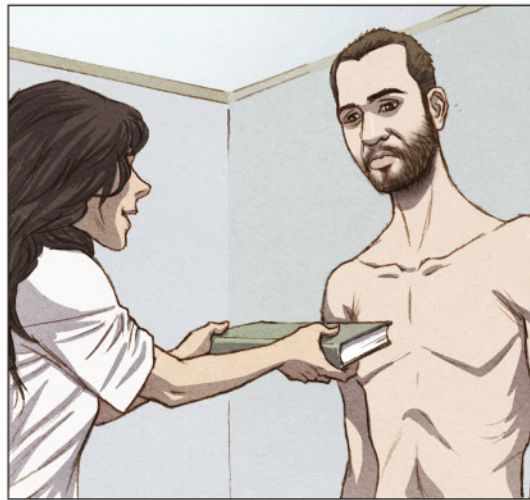
While there are few precedents for *HOAX*'s combination of graphic novel and performance, Alan Moore's work with *The Moon and Serpent* Grand Egyptian Theatre of Marvels comes close, and their homage to Blake, *Angel Passage*, comes closest of all in its attempt to compel its audience to open themselves to an alternative world view by overwhelming multiple senses at once. Teaching *Brin & Bent* to students, having them read the text and listen to the soundtrack that Thornton commissioned to accompany it, has occasioned more than one epiphany. Students have come away describing that earlier work as 'bittersweet', 'necessary' and 'profoundly disturbing' (in a good way). *HOAX* will, I think, take this process of mind expansion to a new level. This piece you hold in your hands is imagination incarnate, but it is also a collation of fragments from a life that ought not to be ignored.



Year One









Roach Psychiatry

Artwork by Mark Stafford







Do they monitor my brain?

Do they torture me at night,
prodding my testicles
and probing my anus?

Clandestine technology
moulded to their cold
grey fingers.

Does my faeces linger on
rubber hospital gloves?

Why play such games
with my reality?



The desert calls to me
in my blood and my bones,
far stronger than this stench
of exquisite corruption.

This cruel and
stinking society
flays origami
butterflies.

The desert calls as it always has,
indifferent to the trends of our minds
because the desert is real
and awaits our return.

