

## INTERVIEW

# Comics Activism: An Interview with Comics Artist and Activist Kate Evans

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This is an interview with comics artist Kate Evans, author of *Red Rosa* (2015) and *Threads: From the Refugee Experience* (2017), as well as a number of other comics, about her recent work, which operates at the intersection of several of the most exciting genre developments in comics in recent years. In the interview Evans reflects on recent shifts in comics journalism, as well as other trends in the field such as the rise of graphic memoir, through examples taken from Evans's own work as well as that of Joe Sacco, Lynda Barry, Alison Bechdel and others.

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Kate Evans's work operates at the intersection of several of the most exciting genre developments in comics in recent years, including graphic memoir and biography, graphic reportage or comics journalism, and educational comics. Her comics address a range of pressing contemporary issues, from climate change and the refugee crisis to women's rights. They also traverse different platforms, from her several book-length comics to her online blog, which she regularly updates with cartoons satirising politicians from Theresa May and Boris Johnson to Donald Trump. Meanwhile, her graphic biography of Rosa Luxemburg, *Red Rosa* (2015), situates these graphic commentaries within a much longer historical trajectory of anti-capitalist thought, and these deeper structural understandings of contemporary crises are conveyed to readers in her comics journalism – or as she suggests in this interview, the perhaps more appropriately termed 'comics activism'. Evans is a crucial figure in contemporary comics and her work, which strives to educate and politicise readers in equal measure,

never loses sight of the powers of satire and humour that have so long informed political comics, drawing on this tradition to enhance the socially pertinent messages they so often contain.

**Dom Davies:** Hi Kate, thanks so much for taking the time to answer these questions.

**I was very excited to read your new comic, *Threads: From the Refugee Crisis* (2017; Figures 1 and 2), about the refugee camps in Calais, which has become widely known as 'the jungle'. There have been several comics in the last couple of years about the refugee experience, such as those by the *PositiveNegatives* (2015) project or Jake Halpern and Michael Sloan's 'Welcome to the New World' (2017), which was published serially in *The New York Times* between January and September 2017. Do you have any thoughts on why comics have been so widely used for telling the stories and documenting the experiences of refugees?**

**Kate Evans:** It's a very immediate medium, as accessible as film in the way that you can really see someone. In fact, I would argue that it's more accessible because when you read someone's story in a comic book, you provide your own voice in your head for their words, so immediately that person is someone who sounds like you. This is accompanied by all the emotional connection of seeing the expressions on their faces in the pictures.

Furthermore, unlike film there are no budgetary constraints – you can set a comic anywhere in the world with a few reference photos (although I would still argue that a comic is always better when it is drawn by someone who has been to the place concerned).

And comics are particularly suited to telling the stories of people who have been through traumatic experiences and who have a need for anonymity, because you can change the names and faces of the 'characters' yet still depict someone who



**Figure 1:** Excerpt from Evans, Kate (2017) *Threads: From the Refugee Crisis* (London & New York: Verso) © Kate Evans.

is recognisably human. With film, you have to alter someone's voice or black out the face which depersonalises the story teller. With comics, you can simply select another face and draw them differently.

Comics storytelling also facilitates the judicious use of humour. There are funny, wry or silly aspects to most situations, and by drawing them out and sprinkling parts of the narrative with them, I try to prevent *Threads* from being too dark, which serves to underline people's underlying humanity and resilience. In a few places in the book I make myself the butt of the joke, because I think the bumbling white Western do-gooder deserves to be laughed at. It's also a contrast technique, because by lightening parts of the narrative, it gives greater force to the truly horrible events that happen elsewhere.

Other comics artists who use a mixture of comedic and serious tones are Art Spiegelman in *Maus*, (2003) where the frustration the narrator feels at his father's eccentricities are used as a counterpoint to the story from the death camps, and Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* (2008), where the author's childlike rebellion gives a comedy counterpoint to the evils of the Iranian regime. These two last books are both refugee narratives, by the way, but they aren't generally considered as such; they tend to be classified as classics of comics literature.

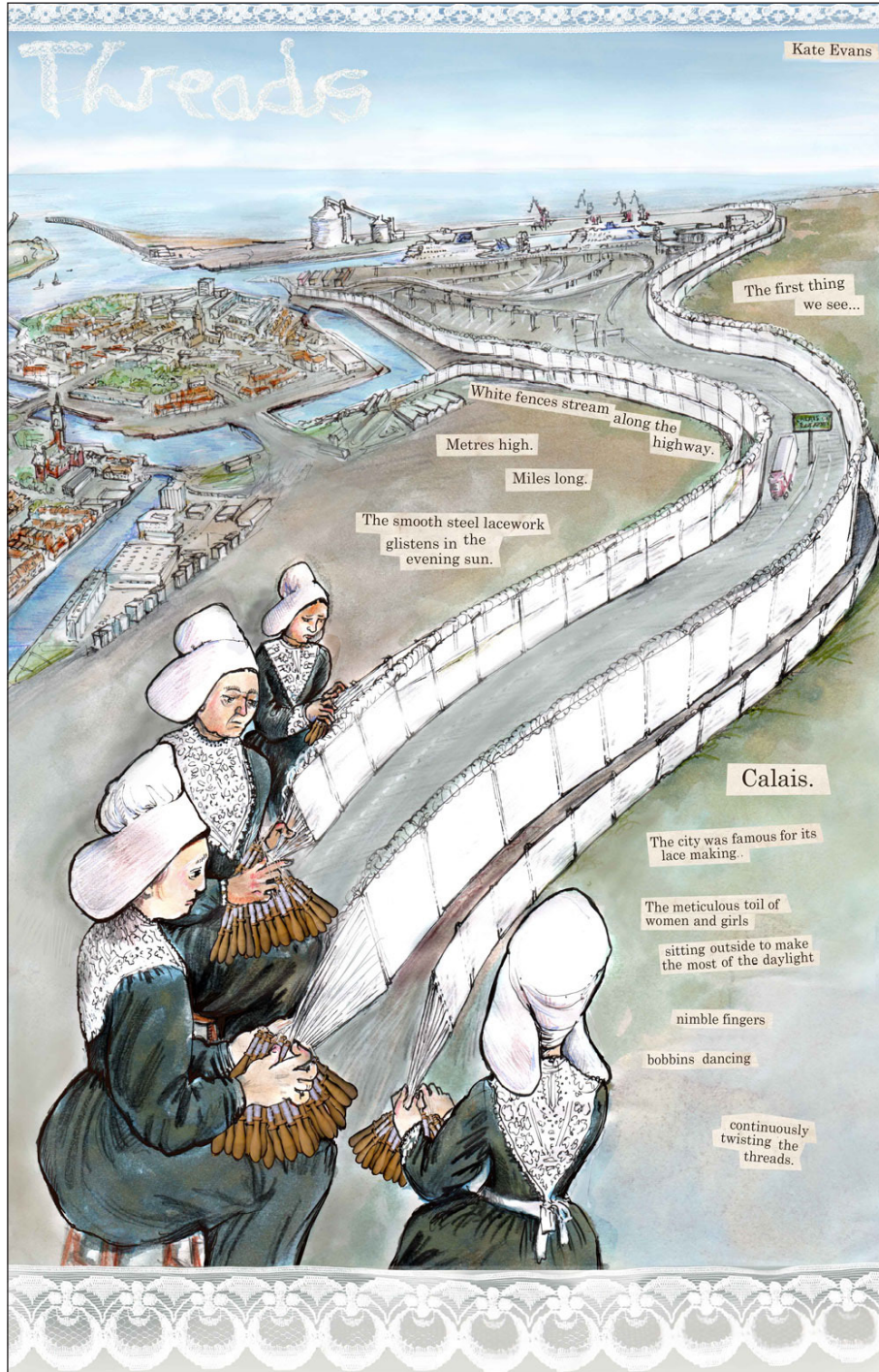


Figure 2: Excerpt from Evans, Kate (2017) *Threads: From the Refugee Crisis* (London & New York: Verso) © Kate Evans.



**DD: That's a great point about *Persepolis* and *Maus* being refugee narratives. Both of these were, of course, published serially first, even though they now circulate predominantly as books. And other comics about refugees have tended to circulate online first and, as a result, have been quite short, snapshot narratives. When and how did you decide to do a book-length comic about your time in Calais?**

**KE:** The first, short comic was drawn as a blog post after I returned from the Jungle in October 2015. I had no intention of making a printed version of it, and was deliberately loose with the page construction, some being much longer or shorter than others. Each page has a different colour background as a way of differentiating between the sections, because I was aware that the reader wouldn't have something to physically turn.

But I knew I would go back. Everyone who volunteers in Europe with refugees asks, 'When are you going back?' But I'm busy, I have kids, I had the book *Red Rosa* to launch (**Figure 3**). I returned for a brief 48 hour stint and came back and wrote the script for what became the 'Day Tripper' chapter of *Threads*, which was twenty pages of comics that I didn't then have time to draw.

Then I visited for a week, with my husband and a midwife friend who is known in the narrative as 'Jet'. And so many things happened. When I got home, I knew I had enough material for a book. All three scripts seemed to write themselves. It felt very urgent, to create a document that could give someone a sense of what is happening to refugees in Europe at this time in history, even though it's such a tiny piece of a much bigger story, such an inadequate thread in a much, much bigger tapestry.

**DD: You also made a decision to draw yourself into the comic, and to foreground the way in which the stories and lives you document are altered by your interaction with them. Do you think of yourself as a comics journalist in this work? Or still as an artist? Or do you in fact have to be both at the same time?**



**Figure 3:** Excerpt from Evans, Kate (2015) *Red Rosa: A Graphic Biography* (London & New York: Verso) © Kate Evans.

**KE:** The narrative centres around me because it's limited to my direct experience of the camps. There were far worse things that I heard about second hand, but I couldn't make the book any bigger than the things that I actually saw and experienced.

I probably see myself more as an activist than as a journalist or an artist. Although I am happy to work with newspapers and magazines, I have an uneasy relationship with the journalistic profession, born from a distaste acquired when I was a roads protestor and the subject rather than the author of journalistic enquiry. Graphic journalism implies that the writer makes a stab at objectivity. I don't believe that objectivity exists. I like my comics to do something, I have an axe to grind, I will use every tool in my toolkit to engage the reader with the story, to take them on an emotional journey, and so I will enhance the drama of the situation as much as I possibly can insofar as it is consistent with the facts.

There is a central emotional crisis point in *Threads* which documents the riot police coming into the home of a young refugee mother and slapping her in the face. I use every trick in the book to intensify that representation. I use full page frames, I use intense colour, I use dramatic foreshortening, I have the mother framed by her

young children who react to the situation, and, crucially, I show the action happening over four frames rather than three—and in that third frame, I make the woman stare back defiantly into the eyes of the policeman who is assaulting her. I give her agency. I give her a moment of resistance.

That is an artistic representation documenting a real event. It is up to you to decide whether I'm an artist or a journalist.

**DD: I very much like the idea of the comics activist! I think that's particularly accurate. But you also don't paint a particularly flattering portrait of yourself in *Threads*! This reminds me of the way Joe Sacco draws himself in his work. Do you consider him an influence? And do you consciously incorporate any other methods by other comics artists, journalists or as you say, activists?**

**KE:** Ah, yes, my friend Nadine commented as I was drawing *Threads* that: 'You know, you don't actually look like a potato'. But I feel like a potato. I deliberately drew an unglamorous, gormless version of myself in the book as a representation of how out-of-my-depth I felt in that situation. Also, I think there's something subversive and refreshing about having a podgy middle-aged housewife as the 'hero' of a story. Women *have* to be young and sexy in our culture. And conventionally sexy at that. There is a reader review of *Red Rosa* up on Amazon which says: 'The only criticism is that Rosa is not depicted as being at all glamorous'. Well, firstly, she *is* super glamorous, the reader is just confused because I show her having leg hair. But also, why should she be glamorous? Would anyone make that criticism of a graphic biography of Marx?

I was doing graphic reportage, and in fact I also visited Palestine and drew comics about it, before I ever read Joe Sacco's work. There are definite parallels there, but not influence.

**DD: The aesthetic style of *Threads* clearly has some similarities with your other work, but on the whole marks quite a distinct shift I think. Most notably, of course, is the actual 'threads' of lace themselves that sit on top of some of the**

**drawn pages. Could you talk a little about how you came to use this visual metaphor, with a material that actually comes three-dimensionally off the page?**

**KE:** The use of lace in *Threads* comes from the discovery that Calais was a lace making town. On my first trip to the city, I was intending to go to a far-right rally on the beach on the Sunday afternoon, but it was banned, so I went to the lace-making museum instead and took photos. On reflection, this is quite a journalistic thing to do. I suppose I am a journalist really.

More generally, I just 'saw' that I would have to do the comic on a rough paper background so that the lace would form the edges of the frames. I have a lot of photos of lace from various sources stored on my computer in a file marked 'no borders'. Lynda Barry's book, *One! Hundred! Demons!* (2002), is a favourite of mine, so I may have been subconsciously influenced by her use of collage.

I use different lace in different chapters, and then return to those same lace frames to help orient the reader in the narrative. Dunkirk camp has grey lace which looks like raindrops; the scenes in Hoshyar's hut have one particular border, and the scenes in the warehouse have another. Drawing graphic novels is so incredibly time-consuming that you have time to work on all the little details.

Another stylistic shift that occurs on the second page of the book is that I switched from drawing ink to coloured pencil. I drew that first blog post in tearing hurry and I suddenly realised that if I had to remix brown and yellow every time I wanted to make someone's skin tone I would be there all month. So I grabbed some coloured pencils, and really got to work.

In some places, the colour gives consistency to the book. My hair, for example, is always drawn with the same two coloured pencils. I created a kind of apartheid with the skin tones; all the Africans, Arab/Afghan/Iranians and White Europeans are done with three different base tones to give a visual echo to the social divisions that they are subject to.

In other places, the colour gives added intensity to the action. I really was standing by a green plastic tarpaulin in the events that are depicted in the 'I Predict a



Riot', but as I drew it, the intensity of that green, filling more and more of the page, echoes the intensity of the action. The red sunset on page 133 does something even more dramatic. I'm probably more influenced by an analysis of Mary Blair's use of colour in the Disney films than by any other graphic novelist in this regard.

**DD: In addition to these stylistic changes, *Threads* and *Red Rosa* seem like two completely different projects. What were the different challenges posed by drawing a journalistic comic about very contemporary events, on the one hand, and a biography of a historical figure, on the other?**

**KE:** *Threads* was a very easy book to write, in that I was simply recounting my experience. In a way I was returning to my roots of graphic reportage from the roads protests, which is where I started as a cartoonist back in the 1990s. *Red Rosa* is the product of months of research and entailed reading some extremely dull works of nineteenth-century socialist theory.

The hardest thing about writing *Rosa* was compressing all of her life into such a short time frame – I had to leave so much out. My initial script had much more detail in, and I had to lose little frames of action that I could see in my head, places where Dr Luxemburg tosses her head or takes someone's hand, just because I only had six frames a page to move the action on.

I knew when I finished *Rosa* that the next project I took on would take place over a different time frame. I assumed that I would do another historical project, but something that took place over weeks or months rather than a whole lifetime. Then I visited Calais and Dunkirk. *Threads* documents only ten days of my direct experience. I needed the space to depict everything, and not leave anything out.

The picture research for *Red Rosa* was painstaking, because it is recreating nineteenth-century Berlin, a place that doesn't exist any more. I had to check everything for historical accuracy – I found myself checking small facts, such as whether they had celery in Warsaw in the 1880s. I assumed that the picture research for *Threads* would be easier, but in fact it was still quite distracting because there is a lot more visual material online to browse with a contemporary event.

By the end of drawing *Threads* I was sick of drawing pallets. Count them. There are a lot.

*Threads* is challenging for me because it's very personal – I feel a bit like it's a diary or work of poetry, whereas *Rosa* is a lot more detached. And with all my previous books, on breastfeeding, climate change, pregnancy and birth, and the life of Dr Luxemburg, I feel like an expert: I have no problem standing up and expounding on the facts that I explore in those books. But with *Threads* I'm not the expert. It's not my story to tell.

**DD: In *Red Rosa* you spend time documenting often unknown biographical details of Rosa Luxemburg's life, but you also use the comics form to explain some of her most important critical ideas. Were these different aspects both conscious goals of the project? And do you see them as related at all?**

**KE:** To misquote Dr Luxemburg: 'You mustn't think I love her only for her body. I cannot by any means separate that from the spiritual. To me they are all one'.

So yes, I wanted to educate the reader as fully about Dr Luxemburg's ideas as space would allow, and I am irritated with comic biographies which don't elaborate on people's ideas and simply recount the events of their lives. Comics give a lot of opportunity to illustrate abstract ideas. I'm strongly influenced by the *For Beginners* graphic guides to Marx, Freud and so on, which I read in my youth.

Before I was commissioned to write *Red Rosa* I was actively looking for a book about capitalism. I was considering doing the same thing with capitalism as I did for climate change with *Funny Weather* (Evans 2006), but through Dr Luxemburg's story I found a much more entertaining way of critiquing capitalism through showing the history of the resistance to it.

**DD: In many ways, *Red Rosa* might be positioned within the now well-recognised tradition of graphic memoir, in which comics are used to document the stories of unusual lives, and especially women's lives. Why do you think comics lend**

**themselves to different kinds of life-writing such as these? And do you think of *Red Rosa* as a kind of memoir?**

**KE:** I think of it as docu-drama because it contains fictionalised encounters between real people. However, the advantage of the comics medium is that I can then weight the action with references to Luxemburg's actual words. It is as though you could pause a film biography of Luxemburg and pull down a reference to her writings.

I think there are too many graphic memoirs – the tragic childhood is becoming a cliché. There is a lot more to creating a good graphic novel than simply recounting the events of a person's life. The best transform the medium, stretch it, take it to new places. Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home* (2006) is an incredibly literary work, full of visual metaphors which are very conventionally novelistic, but in a whole new medium. Lynda Barry's *One! Hundred! Demons!* (2002) has a poignant simplicity to its structure. Rachael Ball's works *The Inflatable Woman* (2015) and her forthcoming book *Wolf Man* take real life events but transform them into a mythical dreamworld of archetypes. And by the way, as far as unflattering self representations go, Rachael Ball's far exceed mine or Joe Sacco's!

**DD: Thanks so much for your time Kate and for sharing these fascinating insights into your work; it's been great talking to you.**

## Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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