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When Comics Become Part of a Thesis Project

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Abstract: This article outlines my doctoral thesis project that began in October 2021. Given the interdisciplinary nature of this hybrid doctoral project, the challenge is twofold. First, bridging the gap between a historical analysis of an object of study, using archival research and, second, a self-reflection on the production of a comic strip, its communication and accessibility, both requiring constant adaptation of the methodology. The first part of the thesis is concerned with answering the research questions relating to wartime godmothers during the First World War in France. Numerous sources have been identified to answer these questions. The second part of the thesis is the creation of a fictional comic strip in collaboration with a female cartoonist. Given that this is a work in progress, the article sets out the initial results and highlights the benefits and challenges of this interdisciplinary practice that have been discovered so far.

Keywords: public history; fiction; combined expertise; comic book; gender; World War I

1 Introduction

“If I have understood correctly what you are writing to me, you would simply like a little letter from time to time to distract you a little from the hard life you lead and encourage you in times of sadness.”¹ Once the morale of the men trapped in the trenches became an issue, various French associations² established a link between the front and the rear. Volunteers, most often women, began sending letters and/or parcels to soldiers who had originally come from invaded regions.³ The word ‘marraine’ (godmother) appeared very clearly in the

spring of 1915. The phenomenon spread throughout France: “what French girl does not have at least one godson?”⁴ It was from this historical subject that the thesis project took shape. The ambition of this doctoral research project,⁵ which began in 2021, was to combine historical rigor with the fictional creation. The first research ideas were based on keywords: “women,” “emotions,” “their relationship with men,” and “the First World War.” The historian Clémentine Vidal-Naquet brought all these ideas together under the heading “war godmothers.”

During the first particularly deadly winter of the war in 1914–1915, various citizens initiatives led to an innovative scheme known as *marrainage*, which took shape in the space of just a few months. The idea was that volunteers, including children and teenage girls, women and occasionally men, would symbolically “adopt” soldiers at the front or prisoners of war, becoming their “godmothers.” The aim was to encourage those who were defending their country by sending letters or parcels on a regular basis. The scheme was hugely popular, and the godmothers soon became a key figure in the war effort. For many they represented changes and desires, they inspired intrigue, mockery, and tribute. They became a central character in the war narrative, featuring extensively in contemporary poems, songs, vaudeville shows, novels, and drawings from 1915 onwards. They were depicted from every angle, as part of every possible scenario.

Although their reputation and contribution were clearly recognized at the time, they have since been forgotten. Knowledge about “war godmothers” remains superficial, within both the academic community and among the general public. It was only in September 2023 that a research project offered a fresh perspective. At the University of Geneva, Marie Leyder submitted a PhD dissertation on nurses and war godmothers on the Yser Front during the First World War. These relationships were analyzed from the perspective of the concept of ‘care’. In spring 2024, the book *Adopte un soldat* (Adopt a soldier) published by Éditions du Mauconduit offered readers a direct glimpse into correspondence between wartime godmothers and their

¹ Departmental Archives Orne, Fonds Fleury, 521 J24, draft letter from Yvonne Fleury, undated.

² One of the best known to date: *La Famille du soldat*, founded by Marguerite de Lens in January 1915.

³ Northern and eastern France.

⁴ Departmental Archives Orne, Fonds Fleury, 521 J24, letter from Léon Blaizot, March 15, 1917.

⁵ The project developed out of a process of reflection and meetings over the three preceding years, with initial research starting in 2018 at the University of Caen Normandie in France under the supervision of Prof. Thomas Hippler.

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godsons. The aim of my PhD was to make accessible this historical resource by applying historical methods, while also producing a comic strip to explore questions of accessibility and communication to a broader audience.

It seemed that a good way to approach this hybrid project would be to work with two universities. The University of Caen and the University of Luxembourg accepted the research topic on war godmothers and also the incorporation of a public history dimension as part of the project. The definition of public history in this case is the transmission of historical knowledge via a chosen medium. Comics, long used as a form of entertainment, represent an effective channel for presenting a fictional narrative while allowing me to engage in a process of reflection.⁶ Another interesting question was how best to facilitate a practice of self-reflection, alongside the archival research, about the communication and accessibility of a comic strip in collaboration with an unfunded illustrator. While this question is not the focus of the article, it may usefully be considered at the same time.

What can a comic strip add to historical analysis? Over and above the pleasure of creating a story and characters and seeing them come to life through the artist's pen strokes, what is the added value from a scholarly viewpoint? The answer lies somewhere between factual sources and fiction. Devising and creating a narrative project as a team means reflecting on the role that fictionalization can play in sharing knowledge with a broad audience.

2 Using Fiction as a Research Tool

2.1 Coping with the Paradoxical Absence of the War Godmother

There is no shortage of available sources to research the topic of war godmothers.⁷ The corpus has been growing steadily since 2018. Private archives such as letters, postcards, photographs, and diaries, as well as administrative, military, and censored documents provide a solid basis from which to address the research questions and find inspiration to create a comic strip narrative. Another type of archive is also useful,

⁶ The research was based at the Luxembourg Centre for Contemporary and Digital History (C²DH), and full use was made of the center's wide-ranging tools and partnerships. Part of the grant awarded by the Dr. Roswitha and Hermann Zeilinger Foundation in winter 2022 was used for the artist's graphic and narrative research, facilitating the production of the comic strip over the four-year time frame of the PhD.

⁷ The study of wartime godmothers is the subject of volume 1 of my doctoral project. It will look at how sponsorship came about, who volunteered to be a godmother and what it ultimately means to act as a woman.

namely cultural works.⁸ On February 18, 1915, Pierre Valdagne (1854–1937) published a story in *Le Journal* entitled simply *La Marraine* (The godmother). Even before the godmother scheme became very popular in spring 1915, godmothers had already become a recognized wartime figure. Interest among artists reached a peak between 1916 and 1917. Godmothers were everywhere: plays, stories, serials, poems, songs, novels, and cartoons in newspapers all featured war godmothers as protagonists and heroines. Despite this plethora of fictional representations, however, little attention was paid to the perspective of the war godmothers themselves. They existed through their role in helping soldiers, but what did they think of the godmother scheme? What emotions did it inspire, and how did they experience it personally? This is where the archives reach their limits – such questions cannot be easily answered using traditional research methods.

Only six of 53 exchanges of letters were written by war godmothers that I found and analyze. Alongside these we have the account of Yvonne Fleury, war godmother to nearly a dozen “godsons” between 1915 and 1917. She started keeping a diary in 1909, and in May 1915 she enrolled as a godmother via one of the most well-known sponsorship associations, *La famille du soldat* (The soldier's family), set up by Marguerite de Lens. Yvonne Fleury's writings offer an insight into the daily life of a war godmother. But although this is an outstanding source, its limits soon became apparent. Yvonne Fleury was not very open about her feelings. She only very occasionally expanded on the thoughts and emotions inspired by her role as a war godmother. Could this be an angle to explore: presenting the mundane details of the life of a war godmother to shed light on the broader picture of women and their war? Although men's stories are often presumed to be more interesting, we could choose to show the originality of the life of a middle-class woman who served as a war godmother in the First World War. How should we understand the war as lived by women? In this case, fiction can become an investigative tool, based on an ongoing process of research.

2.2 Bringing Archives to Life

In the discipline of history, the key resource is archives. Historical research is generally presented in the form of academic articles, lectures or books. At a later stage, historians sometimes think about how they can make this research accessible to a broader audience. They consider other means of giving substance to archives – as historical advisors on film sets, podcast producers or comic strip

⁸ Cultural works here means “oeuvres culturelles,” like tales, songs, poems, plays, illustrations, etc.

writers – that enable them to maintain control over their research. This is one way of engaging in public history.

In this case, I adopted an original approach: even as I delved further into my research topic, she was thinking at the same time about how she could share her results via another medium as well as the traditional dissertation. The archives were coming to life in two different ways at the same time. The time frame of the dissertation was also a consideration: what medium would enable her to achieve this twofold objective? A comic strip seemed to fit the criteria. As an entertainment object, it is a medium that has the potential to catch the attention of a broad audience. Unlike a film or a documentary, the production costs, although not negligible, are affordable. Also, it would enable a visual exploration of the topic that a thesis could only partly offer, since the latter is dependent on sources. The comic strip format brings archives to life, and in so doing it can contribute, in its own way, to the overall research process.

The team set out to produce an educational comic strip: without seeking to function like a documentary, the aim was to inform rather than only entertain. The main target audience were teenagers. Making research accessible means combining historicity, narrative, humor, learning, and entertainment, and this is something that a traditional dissertation is not necessarily able to offer. This begs the question whether the fiction was driven by the research, or whether it was shaped by the collaboration between the artist and I. The starting point was the previously unpublished source material: the diary and correspondence of Yvonne Fleury. “The fact that we are not talking about someone famous or well-known makes it less precise in a way” started to say Laura Bensoussan, – “it offers a degree of freedom in the way things are interpreted.”⁹ This is how she puts a face on a historical figure, while retaining a certain amount of independence. She read the Master’s thesis *Yvonne Fleury et ses filleuls, Relation entre civile et militaires*¹⁰ to gain an insight into the personality and energy of the real-life war godmother, inspiring the graphic artist to create a silhouette and body dynamics. At this point, imagination took over from archival information as she imagined the character’s features. After familiarizing herself with Yvonne Fleury’s story, the illustrator stepped away from the existing material to come up with a new vision, a new face – ultimately a new archive. And with that, the character of Augustine Bouquet came to life (Figures 1 and 2).

⁹ Interview with the illustrator Laura Bensoussan in 2021.

¹⁰ Aliénor Gandanger, *Yvonne Fleury et ses filleuls, Relation entre civile et militaires*, Master’s thesis, University of Caen, 2020.



Figure 1: Photo of Yvonne Fleury. Credit: Orne Departmental Archives.



Figure 2: Illustration of Augustine Bouquet. Credit: Laura Bensoussan.

2.3 Using Research to Construct Convincing Fiction

There is no shortage of material to develop a narrative and tell a story about the godmothers. So, what was the best way to approach the production of a comic strip set during the First World War? Laura Bensoussan's initial reaction was negative: "At the beginning, I really wasn't keen! (...) as a very impressionable and emotional person, the idea of creating drawings related to the war didn't appeal to me at all."¹¹ Visual representations of the First World War, for example films and comic books, rightly tend to address themes such as violence, suffering and fear experienced during fighting. But for this research on war godmothers, the only reference to these themes are odd phrases in letters, and even then they are often only hinted at. Soldiers' correspondence was doubly censored, and this prevented them from writing about the daily challenges they were facing. While not every letter passed through the hands of the military censors, the impact was clearly felt. Moreover, the soldiers' virility would be undermined if they expressed and shared their feelings with a woman – especially a stranger who they had never actually seen before. So for this research-based story, the focus had to be on war godmothers. The idea was to stay well away from the front and to try to understand how these women experienced the war, without seeing it, by reading newspapers and writing to soldiers.

Beyond the war itself, the second aspect of the project was the historical period. Historical fiction based in the early 20th century requires research to ensure that it is historically authentic. The idea was to give an impression without caricaturing, to provide detail without falling into the trap of anachronism, unless anachronism was introduced deliberately when constructing the fiction. Good fiction depends on effective research. By delving into the life of Yvonne Fleury, the team hoped to gain some time and facilitate the narrative process. The real and fictionalized stories both take place in Saint-Mandé, a small town east of Paris. Drawing on earlier master's research, much was known about the town and the surrounding area. With the help of the Saint-Mandé town archivist, Ariane Dutartre, the setting for the story began to take shape. Some 60 historical postcards were collected, then a visit was made to present-day Saint-Mandé to identify features that had previously existed but were no longer there. Where archives were unable to provide answers, fiction took over, based on suppositions. The aim was to strike a balance

between what was plausible, as sought by the researcher, and the imaginary vision proposed by the artist on the basis of partial research. The fictionalized story and the research process were mutually enriching. Before our latest research on Saint-Mandé, two initial versions of the story – one produced in fall 2021 and one a year later – included a scene with a tennis game between the main heroine, Augustine, and her friend Lucienne. The illustrator opted for a tennis court fairly similar to what we know today (Figure 3). Only the outfits, rackets and balls were different from those of the twenty-first century. But when our research in the summer of 2023 revealed what the Saint-Mandé tennis courts had actually looked like (Figure 4), that pointed us towards something more original, demonstrating that research can clearly inform fiction, in terms of both authenticity and originality.

Historical fiction enables us to explore things that are not immediately apparent in the archives. Nevertheless, one needs to start by sufficiently immersing oneself in the sources and the latest research, before being able to propose a narrative that is both fictional and historical. Fiction can then become a research tool, providing answers through the narration of characters, plots and settings. When designing a comic strip, this requires expertise in storytelling, the ability to create a narrative and to present it in a sequence. In addition, in this research work I use two ways of looking at history, through a scientific lens and through a creative one. My historical analysis is the fruit of numerous hypotheses put into narrative form. By conducting this work with Laura Bensoussan, comics allow us to give a visual response to our hypotheses, which is one of the advantages of this interdisciplinary practice. There's a sort of passage of torch between the historian and the scriptwriter that I am. However, this interweaving of skills and collaborating with a cartoonist bring its own challenges.

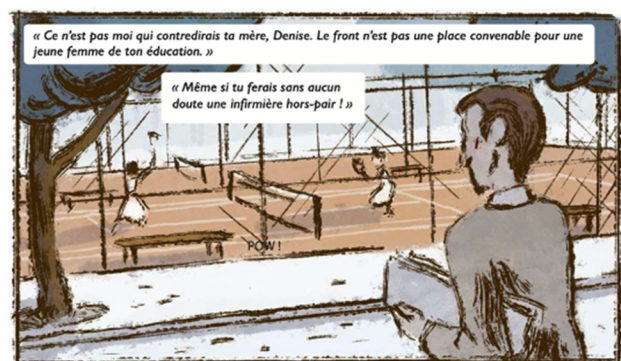


Figure 3: Fictional Saint-Mandé Tennis Courts. Saint-Mandé Tennis Courts. Credit: Laura Bensoussan.

¹¹ Interview with the illustrator Laura Bensoussan in 2021.



Figure 4: Saint-Mandé Tennis Courts. Credit: Saint-Mandé Municipal Archives.



Figure 5: Gazengel. Credit: Valentine and Aliénor Gandanger.

3 The Added Value of Working with an Illustrator

3.1 Tackling Challenges Through Teamwork

During an episode of *Gazengel*¹² entitled *Passion BD* (A passion for cartoons), the three characters discuss the added value of working with a cartoonist (Figure 5).

What emerges from this group discussion is the possibility of visually depicting a research result, concept, or emotion. To do so, each participant in the project draws on the expertise of the others. This is how a balance is struck between the role of text and illustration. The absence of dialogue in a comic strip in no way indicates that my scholarly knowledge has been sidelined. On the contrary, if the drawing is full of detail and speaks for itself, it is because there have already been discussions, questions have been raised, and adjustments made. The resulting sequence reflects this preliminary, preparatory work. The ability to depict an event with all the historical

begins with a vital step: a discussion about the context and the main thread of the narrative. By giving the artist access to a series of sources, starting with visual sources, she is able to understand the “where,” the “when,” and the “who” and bring to life the characters and settings, and above all to suggest narrative techniques in situations where historical analysis does not provide satisfactory answers, or conversely if the research is overly detailed and care needs to be taken to avoid a scene becoming a history lesson.

In short, for me producing comic art meant relinquishing a certain degree of control. The contextualization that is so vital for historical research takes on a different form when creating a fictionalized narrative. To lighten the storytelling, the cartoonist proposed a scenario that contained all the same elements but presented completely differently. All the tools in the comic armory – a gesture by a character, an expression, a phrase in a speech bubble – were used to tell the story of war godmothers in a new way. Five pages of a dissertation chapter can be summed up in one frame of a comic strip. The advantage of an interdisciplinary approach is the ability to present a historical object in a new visual way, making it accessible and fun. But this combination of skills required I must make certain “concessions,” starting with the way in which the story begins. The transition from a state of peace to a state of war is a

¹² *Gazengel* is a project developed alongside the PhD in collaboration with Valentine Gandanger. To find out more, see @lespapotages_de_Gazengel on Instagram (in French), and also on the University of Luxembourg website in three languages.

deeply significant moment in the diary of war godmother Yvonne Fleury. I was keen to introduce readers to this pivotal stage in the life of an everyday citizen. But the illustrator saw things differently. The heroine is a war godmother, so the story should start just before she takes on this role – the idea is to get straight to the point of the story. The argument is contained in the narrative, although there may be some justification for referring to a previous event and maybe depicting it in images later on for the purposes of the story. So the approach to chronology is completely different. Traditional research is given the comic book treatment, subjected to conventions such as ellipses and flashbacks, which challenge the conventional methodology of a discipline usually based on contextualization, chronology, and the presentation of analysis and theories in a logical order. But what is important to realize is that comic strips can help us to understand history and make it accessible without simplifying research. Teaming up with a comic artist is the first step in this process.

3.2 Adjustable Methodology or Learning How to Work Together

“Working with an illustrator is a privilege!”¹³ One of the main differences between the artist and me was our visual conception of the fictionalized story. Although I often imagined how images could be used to construct the various scenes, I had no spatial restrictions, whereas the artist was obliged to think in terms of frames and numbers of pages. If a scene develops over the course of a conversation, the illustrator has to rein things in by reminding the team that it has to fit into a certain number of pages, frames and speech bubbles. The limited space generally leads to “less but better.” Comic strips enable readers to follow a story in three stages: drawings, text, and drawings plus text, and it is important to make use of this. It is a real challenge, as “we researchers place too much emphasis on text,” as the character of Andreas Fickers reminds us in the *Passion BD* episode of the Gazengel series. What might seem to be a form of censorship is really just a limit. Working within a framework can inspire creativity.

¹³ In March 2023, I had the opportunity to talk to South African historian Richard Conyngham about our respective experiences collaborating with artists and illustrators on a comic strip project. His project, entitled *All Rise. Resistance and Rebellion in South Africa 1910–1948* came out in January 2022. Find out more: <https://www.courrierinternational.com/diaporama/recit-historique-en-afrique-du-sud-une-bande-dessinee-pour-raconter-les-rebelles-et-leurs-ideaux>. See also Andreas Etges, “Stories from a Dusty Basement: A Conversation with Richard Conyngham on All Rise: Resistance and Rebellion in South Africa (1910–1948) – A Graphic History.” *International Public History*, vol. 6, no. 1, 2023, 55–71, <https://doi.org/10.1515/iph-2023-2001>.

When asked “How do you work with a historian?” the comic artist replied: “I would say just the same as with anyone else! If I work in a pair, we exchange our ideas and try to make them coincide and to get the best out of each other’s areas of expertise.”¹¹ To start with, each party responds to the other’s expectations: I provides the raw material and focuses on what she feels it is important to include, from the perspective of the research and the audience; while the cartoonist reflects on how to produce a narrative that will create an overall logic and make the comic enjoyable to read – in short, standing up for the basic purpose of comics, namely to entertain. But the boundaries between the two can become blurred. Although the artist is responsible for determining the sequence and structure, I may have ideas as to how to present certain aspects. And the artist may contribute to the discussion on research aspects to help find a narrative solution to the story. The expertise of the two parties intersects when working on the sequences and dialogues, and ultimately it can sometimes be difficult to distinguish who has contributed what to a given scene. Roles are not set in stone. This was also accentuated by the choice of the initial working method. There was no script. The two team members met three times, with roughly a year between each meeting, to work on a structure. All the scenes were worked on together. It was only as the various frames and pages were determined that the two really got their bearings, this time with each working remotely. I would often ask to participate in the task of writing the dialogue. I wanted to try my hand at the complicated process of producing dialogue to familiarize myself with a new form of writing that was completely different from writing up research. The cartoonist was happy to work in this way and would then take the dialogue and make it as authentic as possible – in other words give the impression that the characters are really speaking. The working method of the team was therefore constantly adjusted, and this gave the researcher the opportunity to develop new writing skills.¹⁴

3.3 Bringing a Fragment of Research to Life

Achieving the intended result, in other words presenting a fragment of the story by breaking it down into chunks and writing a suitable dialogue, required lengthy reflection and astute choices. This page corresponds to the first flashback, just after the opening scene in which readers might wonder what might have happened to the character of Augustine, the heroine of the story. This first scene is designed to present all

¹⁴ My thesis will include an analysis of disagreements and compromises that were made.

the initial elements: the main characters, the setting and the historical context. The scene opens as the two young women are exchanging their first letters. The reader immediately begins to understand the duo of Augustine and Lucienne and the dynamic between the two friends. Lucienne is excited and talkative, while Augustine is calmer and more reflective. Dialogue is rarely documented, but it can give readers a glimpse of the emotions that exchanging letters with a war godson might have inspired – coming into contact with a soldier, learning where he is from and whether he has any family members, whether he needs anything. The new war godmother may have any number of questions. As the story develops, readers learn that neither of the two women has a brother or a fiancé at the front. It is as if they are isolated

from a reality that is largely confined to the trenches. This is where the story really comes into its own, helping us to understand what war is like through the experience of an unknown soldier in his letters (Figure 6).

The choice of setting for this scene is crucial, because the church in Saint-Mandé recurs throughout the story for the character of Augustine. We see a clue in the second speech bubble on the page: “Ah! I knew I’d find you here!” All the scenes involving the church need to be both well documented, as the church still exists, but also adapted in various ways. The story takes place at the beginning of the twentieth century, but since then the choir and pulpit have changed following the Second Vatican Council in the 1960s. We needed to take these changes into account to avoid any



Figure 6: Comic strip frame 1: Augustine! – frame 2: Ah! I knew I’d find you here! – frame 3: What’s going on, Lulu? Is everything all right?/Yes! I ran to find you as soon as I received it! Look!/Oh, is it...? – frame 4: My goodness! – frame 5: My very first reply from a soldier. You see, it arrived even more quickly than we thought. Come on, I’m dying to open it with you!/Yes, I’m very curious too. I haven’t received anything yet ... But calm down, or Father Hubert will have words with you ... Credit: Laura Bensoussan and Aliénor Gandanger.

anachronisms. Because of a lack of sources, and also to facilitate the narrative, some scenes are set in a room next to the church that never existed. Here, the fiction takes over. So the Saint-Mandé church has been subject to adaptation, creation and deliberate choices, becoming a setting that is both real and fictionalized.

The artistic approach is visually rich, but with a simplified design for the speech bubbles and outlines of each frame. The pages are easy to read, and the drawings are inked so as to vary the line weight between foreground, middle ground and background. The decision to use a restricted color palette helps to create a historical atmosphere.

4 Conclusion

The hybrid nature of this PhD project requires a constant interplay between historicity and narrative, the use of archives and fiction, contextualization and accessibility. The answer to the question of whether the fiction was

driven by research or shaped by the collaboration between the researcher and the artist is a twofold one. Without research, there could be no fiction. But the originality of the project lies in its interdisciplinary collaboration. The methodology developed between the two team members paved the way for a deepening of the historical analysis of war godmothers via contemporary visual research, while also providing answers to the research questions identified at the beginning of the research process. The two aspects of the PhD are mutually enriching and target different audiences in different forms: an interdisciplinary dissertation and an educational comic book. In my view, it is not a question of competition between the two ways of producing and telling the story, but rather of understanding how they complement each other. At the current stage of my research, it will be relevant to understand the possible limits of storytelling through comics. The question now is how the pages produced over the four years will take shape, whether online or in print, published and distributed as a comic book. Only time will tell.