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## Addiction and Recovery in American Comic Books and Graphic Novels<sup>1</sup>

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Representations of addiction and addiction recovery in literature, music, art, film, theatre, and comedy simultaneously reflect and shape the historical evolution of these experiences. This paper explores the portrayal of drug use and addiction in American comic books and graphic novels.

Comic books in the United States began as syndicated series within newspapers and then emerged in the 1930s as independent publications—spurred in great part by the enormous popularity of Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster's *Superman*. The success of *Superman* spawned the “superhero” genre of American comic books, including Captain America, Plastic Man, Flash, Green Lantern, Captain Marvel, and numerous others. Topically, comic books expanded exponentially into the arenas of science fiction, fantasy, adventure, romance, police procedurals, animal stories, horror, cultural satire, and pornography. New formats emerged as compiled collections, webcomics, graphic novels, and graphic biographies and memoirs. Comic books evolved into a social subculture and industry whose central characters have been further popularized in television and film.

In 1954, the Comics Magazine Association of America banned all drug references in its “Comics Code” based on the belief that such references would trigger youth curiosity and drug experimentation. Stan Lee, Editor-in-Chief at Marvel Comics, challenged this code in 1971 by portraying addiction and its consequences in *The Amazing Spider-Man* series #96 - #98. Lee's action, and the positive public response to the series, opened the door for the portrayal of drug use and addiction in American comic books. Lee's actions were part of his larger effort to address social issues of his day, including civil rights, disability rights, gay rights, war, and civil disobedience. Lee's efforts set the stage for the subsequent portrayal of addiction and recovery in American comic books and graphic novels.

Since *The Amazing Spider-Man*, superhero comic books have weaved authentic human struggles, and specifically mental health disorders, within their storylines. American comic books and graphic novels have been effective vehicles for conveying information on a broad spectrum of health challenges, including childhood trauma, depression, bipolar disorder, schizophrenia, obsessive-compulsive Disorder, anorexia, and a wide spectrum

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<sup>1</sup> This paper merges a collection of five blogs posted by the authors at [www.williamwhitepapers.com](http://www.williamwhitepapers.com) during December 2020 and January 2021.

of substance use disorders (A. White, 2020).

The authors are currently investigating the historical portrayal of addiction and recovery within American comic books and graphic novels. To date, we have identified 35 comic books and 9 graphic novels and graphic biographies and memoirs that portray drug use, addiction, and addiction recovery within their storylines. Below are some preliminary observations on the portrayal of drug use and addiction.

### **Format Limitations**

Drug use, addiction, and recovery in American comic books appear in a few panels or page spreads, often unfolding across multiple volumes, within a larger dramatic storyline. In addition, characters often come in and out of storylines across different titles often called crossovers. For example, both Carol Danvers and Tony Stark have addiction related plots that cross over between *The Invincible Ironman* and *The Avengers* series. This can make it difficult to track down each relevant plotline in long running comic book series. In contrast, graphic novels, such as *The Abominable Mr. Seabrook*, *The Brandon Novak Chronicles*, and *Sobriety: A Graphic Novel* provide a more focused, nuanced portrayal of addiction and recovery.

### **Addiction as Inevitable Consequence of Drug Use**

The portrayal of addiction and recovery is a subset of the much larger portrayal of alcohol and other drug use within American comic books and graphics novels. American comic books, mirroring popular and professional

conceptions, make little distinction between drug use (particularly illicit drug use) and drug addiction, with drug use portrayed primarily as an inevitable precursor to addiction. Portrayal of positive aspects of drug use are rare (e.g., *Animal Man*) and mostly contained in such counter-culture classics as *The Fabulous Furry Freak Brothers*, *James Bong*, and *Marijuana Man*. Illicit drug use is portrayed dichotomously as abstinence (good) or addiction (evil). American comic books portray addiction as a progressively accelerating process of personal deterioration, social estrangement, and economic impoverishment.

### **Addiction as an Intrapersonal Vulnerability**

American comic books and graphic novels portray addiction in highly personal terms (i.e., individual vulnerability) with little reference to its political, economic, and social ecology. Such portrayal is congruent with biological and psychological models of addiction but ignore environmental influences on the etiology and long-term course of addiction. The portrayed class context of drug use follows two lines: impoverished inner-city environments or the subculture of wealth and celebrity. This dichotomy can be seen clearly when comparing Holly Robinson's narration in *Catwoman: Crooked Little Town* of drug use within life on the streets with Tony Stark's alcohol use as part of a lavish celebrity lifestyle in *The Invincible Ironman: Demon in the Bottle*.

### **The Drug Menu**

American comic books portray addiction to a broad spectrum of drugs

and other compulsive behaviors (i.e., shoplifting, pornography, self-injury). The addictive substances include those with a traditional pedigree (alcohol, cocaine, methamphetamine, opium, heroin, prescription drugs, ketamine, designer drugs) as well as fictionalized substances such as Venom, Miraclo, Rave, Chocos, Mutant Growth Hormone, Kryptonite, and Substance D that possess a wide range of narcotic, hallucinogenic, or performance-enhancing properties. The rarity in which cannabis appears in addiction/recovery storylines within American comic books is interesting in light of both increased clinical interest in cannabis dependence and changing legal and social policies toward cannabis. Rather than portrayal in fictional comic books, cannabis is a topic explored through graphic nonfiction, such as Box Brown's *Cannabis: The Illegalization of Weed in America*.

### **Single versus Multiple Drug Use**

Addiction in American comic books is most often portrayed as dependence upon a single substance, in contrast to the polydrug use pattern most prevalent among those currently entering addiction treatment in the U.S.

### **Addiction Demographics**

Early comic book culture in the U.S. was dominated by 20- and 30-something White men. Although comic book characters have evolved toward greater diverse representation, the portrayal of women, people of color, and LGBTQ within addiction/recovery storylines remains missing or narrowly subscribed.

### **Addiction Gender**

Addicted women are portrayed physically, morally, and sexually degraded beings devoid of self-agency. Stoddart (2006) suggests this portrayal fits the poisoned maiden archetype: "the female drug addict who is preyed upon by villainous men and saved by heroic men." Left untold are the transformations that unfold for female characters through the recovery process—an issue we will explore in more depth in a forthcoming blog.

### **Portrayed Color and Sexual Orientation of Addiction**

Addiction-related American comic storylines present characters of color as part of the multi-hued illicit drug culture—a stage for the actions of White superheroes. The only key characters of color in addiction story lines were Cecelia Reyes (*X-Men*), Eli Bradley (*Young Avengers*), and Tyrone Johnson (*Cloak & Dagger*). Although gay characters are beginning to appear in comic books (e.g., *Iceman*, *Young Avengers*), we found only two LGBTQ characters appearing in an addiction/recovery storyline—Holly, a lesbian and recovering heroin addict (*Catwoman*), and Klaus, a gay white male (*The Umbrella Academy*). There are yet to be stories highlighting the cultural contexts of addiction among people of color and cultural pathways of addiction recovery.

### **The Roots of Addiction**

The complete addiction story answers many questions. Who was the addicted person prior to drug exposure? What were the motivations and circumstances of initial and continued drug use? What personal or

environmental factors contributed to loss of control over drug use and its related consequences? Is there a recovery and life after recovery story?

The end of the addiction story is a product of how affected individuals and families and their communities answer such questions. In this second of our series, we explore how a sample of 35 American comic books and 9 graphic novels and graphic biographies and memoirs with addiction storylines portray the root causes of addiction.

#### Addiction as Mystery

Some comic books present the etiology of addiction as an unanswered mystery. For example, Wilty, in the early (1949) Wash Tubbs comic series, experiences drinking problems that lead him to an exchange with Ben, a member of Alcoholics Anonymous. Ben explains:

He happened to belong to that 5% of drinkers who are alcoholics. And didn't know that until it was too late....Unlike the ordinary drinker, the alcoholic's mind is so affected that he no longer has the choice of quitting without proper help.....I am an ex-victim myself. ....Doctors have found it's a form of allergy. But they still don't know why it is only present in certain people, any more than why certain others are allergic to pollen.

"It's in my blood."

American comic books and graphic novels often portray the root

cause of addiction in terms of a unique genetic or biological vulnerability. A family history of addiction is the backdrop for addiction storylines in several comics and graphic novels, including the heroin addictions of the characters Leslie in *Hey Kiddo* and Holly Robinson in the *Catwoman* series and the alcoholism of Julia Wertz in *Drinking at the Movies* and the AA member Larry in *Sobriety*. William Seabrook (*The Abominable Mr. Seabrook*) suggests family history as an explanation for his uncontrolled drinking: "Grandma Piny [who was addicted to opium] may be responsible for the drunken dreamer I am today." Similarly, Matthew Parker (*Larceny in My Blood*) offers a similarly simple explanation when asked the reason for his addiction and compulsive stealing: "It's in my blood." A clue to this unique vulnerability was sometimes one's very first response to intoxication, Ruben, the central character in *Buzzkill*, expresses this fatalistic epiphany: "From the day I took my first drink, I knew it was only ever going to end like this. It was only ever going to end in screams."

#### **Adverse Family and Childhood Experiences**

American comic books and graphic novels commonly note the role of family turmoil and early age of onset of drug exposure as causative or contributing factors within their addiction storylines. Parental addiction, adverse childhood experiences (abuse, abandonment), or a turbulent family environment are pre-addiction contexts in the storylines of William Seabrook (*The Abominable Mr. Seabrook*); Leslie (*Hey Kiddo*); Matthew Parker (*Larceny in My Blood*), and Alex, Larry, and Debby (*Sobriety*). Alex describes how the older

boys became his father figures and led to his selling marijuana for them in the estates (projects) and Leslie laments,

“Ma’s drinking was out of control. It was nothing but yelling and screaming between the two of us. I couldn’t take it anymore. Nobody could take it anymore. I had started using before I moved out, but things got worse fast once I got my own place.”

Matthew Parker, as a context for his own drug use, described his mother’s involvement in smuggling and selling drugs and her enlisting his help in selling drugs when he was just 13. Within three years, he was injecting heroin.

### **Lost Control of Performance Enhancement**

Comic book characters who used drugs to enhance their performance prior to their addictions include Batman, Dr. Cecilia Reyes (*X-Men*), Rose Wilson (*Teen Titans*), Johnny Quick, Bart Allen, Ultimate Colossus, and Ruben (*Buzzkill*). Ruben initially introduces himself as follows:

“My name is Ruben and I’m a superhero. Who happens to get his powers from drinking alcohol and doing drugs. It doesn’t make me one of you. It doesn’t make me weak, and it does not make me an addict. It makes me a hero.”

Rose Wilson, in the Fresh Hell storyline notes the performance

enhancing properties of drugs and the diminishment of that power over time:

“Sometimes all you need to keep going... is direction. That’s what epinephrine gives me. A signpost. A glimpse of what’s to come. Or at least it used to.”

Using drugs to offset diminishment of personal powers is also noted in the storylines of Tony Stark (*Ironman*) and Carol Danvers (*Captain Marvel*). Tony uses alcohol in response to his Iron Man suit not working, and Carol uses alcohol when her powers aren’t working. Klaus, in *The Umbrella Academy*, uses drugs to offset the emotional distress related to his special powers (e.g., using drugs to quell voices and images of the dead).

### **Self-medication of Emotional Pain**

Using drugs to self-medicate emotional pain is also a common theme among the addicted characters in American comics and graphic novels. Such emotional distress includes unrequited love (Karen Page / *Daredevil*), breakups of intimate relationships (Harry Osborn / *Spider-Man*), grief following death of a friend (Alex / *Sobriety*), paternal abandonment (Julia Wertz / *Drinking at the Movies*), and PTSD related to wartime experiences (*Wash Tubbs*) or trauma (Jessica Jones / *Alias*).

Emotional pain is a central theme in the portrayal of the onset, maintenance, and progression of addiction. After Matthew Parker experienced the death of two brothers—one murdered and one by suicide, he

records, “I took to heroin with a vengeance.” The character Hannah (*Sobriety*) suggests:

“It gets to the point where you’re willing to go to any lengths to get to a place where there isn’t any pain. It’s not about getting high anymore—it’s about just stopping the pain.”

### **The Addictive Personality**

Addiction vulnerability is also attributed to temperament and character excess (e.g., an “addictive personality”) in American comic books and graphic novels. The character Hannah (*Sobriety*) illustrates such attribution related to rebellion, excessive behavior, risk-taking, and sensation seeking: “I’m what you call a high achiever. When I want something, I go all out. So, summer before college, I hit it [drug use] hard.”

### **Social Influences**

The role of intimate and social relationships in the onset of addiction also appears prominently in American comic books and graphic novels. As Hannah (*Sobriety*) notes, “He [boyfriend] liked to drink and party. Pretty soon, I did too.” Peer influence in the onset of drug use and subsequent addiction play prominently in the storylines of Debbie O’Hara (*New Teen Titans Drug Awareness Special Issue*), Karen Page (*Daredevil*), and Marjane Satrapi (*Persepolis*). Maryjane describes her first exposure to drugs:

“I didn’t like to smoke, but I did it out of solidarity....The communal life went hand in

hand with the use of all kinds of mood enhancers.”

Famed writer William Seabrook similarly described how his drinking fulfilled his perception of great writers as great drinkers within a social world of heavy-drinking authors and celebrities.

The roots of addiction are in some cases linked to predatory influences and encounters with “bad characters.” Examples include the forced injection of Venom (designer steroid) into Bane by the evil Dr. Ruger and Rose Wilson’s addiction to adrenaline by her father, Clock King. In a flashback scene, Rose sees her father saying to her: “This right here, this will make you something greater. You’ll have my strength. My speed. And more.” When she says she’s not sure she wants to take it, he says “You misunderstand me. This isn’t an offer.”

### **Addiction Consequences**

#### **Physical Consequences**

Physical deterioration was among the most prominent consequences of addiction conveyed within the comic books and graphic novels reviewed. Physical manifestations of addiction included portrayals of hangovers and morning drinking as an attempted cure (Julia Wertz / *Drinking at the Movies*; Tony Stark / *The Invincible Iron Man*), memory blackouts (Ruben / *Buzzkill*), as well as an overall erosion of self-care and personal hygiene. Addiction was graphically portrayed via images of dirty, ashen skin, unshaven faces, and disheveled clothing. Physical emaciation of addicted characters was common as was self-expressed concerns about

physical health (Karen Page / *Daredevil*; William Seabrook / *The Abominable Mr. Seabrook*). A typical scene has the central character looking in a mirror and reflecting, “My skin’s a bit green and I pissed blood the other morning. But it’s easier said than done, to kill yourself with booze.” (*The Abominable Mr. Seabrook*).

Physical insults from addiction also included physical injury from accidents while intoxicated (William Seabrook / *The Abominable Mr. Seabrook*; Larry and Alex / *Sobriety*), painful drug withdrawal (Bane), and alcohol or other drug overdose and hospitalization (Tony Stark / *The Invincible Ironman*, Carol Danvers / *The Invincible Ironman*; Rose Wilson / *Teen Titans*). Drug-related death by overdose or suicide were also represented (Leslie / *Hey Kiddo*; Larry and Alex / *Sobriety*; and William Seabrook / *The Abominable Mr. Seabrook*).

### **Psychological Consequences**

The comic books and graphic novels reviewed detailed early psychological effects of addiction. Such effects included embarrassment from drinking behaviors—drunk calls, texts, emails and social media posts, and Amazon buying in Julia Wertz / *Drinking at the Movies*), getting into fights while using (Ruben / *Buzzkill*), sexual encounters while drunk (Jessica Jones / *Alias*), the diminishment or loss of superpowers (Rose Wilson / *Teen Titans*), and cognitive impairment (inability to concentrate, impaired decision-making as illustrated by Tony Stark in *The Invincible Ironman: Demon in a Bottle*). The accumulation of secrets

and shame was a common theme. As Ruben (Buzzkill) reflected:

“Every addict or junkie has their own secrets. Things they’ve done or said. People they’ve hurt... We tell ourselves that the meetings and the journaling will help us to deal with these secrets...What it amounts to is baring every nerve, forcing yourself to face the parts of your story that don’t want to be told. Facing them and making them submit. Dragging them, scrabbling and screaming into the light.”

As addiction progressed within the comic book and graphic novel storylines, early psychological effects were followed by two dominant experiences. The first was radical personality changes while using and overall psychological deterioration marked by hallucinations, paranoia and fear of insanity (Marjane Satrapi / *Persepolis*; Rose Wilson / *Teen Titans*; Matt / *Sobriety*), sometimes requiring psychiatric hospitalization (Klaus / *The Umbrella Academy*). As William Seabrook’s alcoholism progressed, he vacillated between periods of self-loathing and a grandiose sense of self-importance accompanied by a hyper-criticalness of others. In the *Amazing Spider-Man* series, the character Freak, while addicted to heroin, breaks into a laboratory and injects himself with loaded syringes he believes to be heroin but contain instead animal stems cells that turns him into a

monster—a metaphor for the deforming experience of addiction.

A Dr. Jekyll / Mr. Hyde portrayal of addicted characters is common in American comic books and graphic novels, with references to “feral anger” and portrayal of characters with a “monkey on their back” as rabid—wild eyes, sneering mouth, clenched muscles (*Ironman*). Larry, the Alcoholics Anonymous member in the graphic novel *Sobriety* explains such transformations: “Put a drop of booze or mood-altering chemical in us and we change, we become that which we never thought we would: manipulative, lying, stealing, self-centered people...only headed to jails, institutions, or death.”

The second dominate experience involves loss of volitional control over drug use decisions and complete domination of one’s life by drug seeking and drug use. Several central characters describe such effects.

Bane: “I was driven by Venom...It controlled me, not the other way around...the Venom weakened my judgment and I lost everything.”

Larry (*Sobriety*): “And that’s the thing about alcohol use: For a while I thought I was managing it. That’s not really the way it was: It was managing me. I would come to learn that my addiction would, in due course, demand priority over everything, even the woman I married.”

Holly Robinson (*Catwoman*) “And when you’re a junkie that’s all you do—wait to score, wait to shoot up, wait for it to wear off, wait for the guy who gives you more money to score again, do anything he wants to get it, wait to score, wait to shoot up...And, then when you quit, it’s all waiting-to not see the world in junkie-vision, I guess...I wonder when that starts”

Matthew Parker (*Larceny in my Blood*): “Heroin was the dictator of my higher brain functions at the time...2 + 2 = heroin. The capital of Thailand is opium. I think, therefore, I am a junkie.” P. 33; “I couldn’t conceive of a world without heroin. I loved it that much.” P. 213

Brandon Novak (*The Brandon Novak Chronicles*): When asked if he believed in true love, Novak responds, “I believe I truly love heroin!” When asked if he would eat poop for a million dollars, Novak responds, “I’d do it for free if you dipped it in heroin!”

### Effects on Social Functioning

The physical and psychological effects of addiction as represented in American comic books and graphic novels/biographies/memoirs exacerbated multiple areas of social



functioning within the affected characters:

- Dropping out of college: Ruben (Buzzkill)
- Employment challenges (Julia Wertz / *Drinking at the Movies*); loss of leadership position (Tony Stark / *Avengers*); court martial (Carol Danvers / *Avengers*)
- Financial distress (*The Abominable Mr. Seabrook*),
- Indebtedness (Matthew Parker / *Larceny in my Blood*),
- Housing instability and homelessness (Matthew Parker / *Larceny in my Blood*; Matt / *Sobriety*; Holly Robinson / *Catwoman*);
- Loss of driving privileges (Ruben / *Buzzkill*), and
- Drug-related arrests, imprisonment, and revocation of probation or parole (Leslie / *Hey Kiddo*; Matthew Parker / *Larceny in my Blood*; Matt and Hannah / *Sobriety*.)

The addiction-crime link is vividly described in *The Brandon Novak Chronicles*:

“In the daily life of a Junkie, at any given time there is a crime of the moment....Dope provides the addict with the relentless compulsion to lie, cheat, and steal at every opportunity in order to score, and this transformation robs the dope fiend of his humanity.”

## Relationship Effects

American comic books and graphic novels also depict the devastation addiction inflicts on interpersonal relationships. Such effects encompass addiction-related family conflict and family dissolution (Karen Page / *Daredevil*), intimate and collegial relationship conflict over drug use (Tony Stark / *Ironman*; Holly Robinson / *Catwoman*; Jessica Jones / *Alias*; Carol Danvers / *Avengers*), parent-child alienation and lost custody of children (Wilty / *Wash Tubbs*; Debby / *Sobriety*; *Hey Kiddo*), and multiple divorces (William Seabrook / *The Abominable Mr. Seabrook*). The strain on social and intimate relationships is revealed in the storylines of numerous characters.

Matthew Parker (*Larceny in my Blood*): “I was crazy about Maria. But I was crazy for narcotics first.”

Ruben (*Buzzkill*): “None of my friends will talk to me anymore. I understand why. I get it, but it’s just hard.”

Brandon Novak (*The Brandon Novak Chronicles*): “I am a predator and a tortured soul. She [former girlfriend] is my prey and my savior.”

## The Portrayal of Addiction Recovery

### Limited Portrayal of the Recovery Experience

While addiction is a central thread within many American comic book and graphic novel storylines, the addiction recovery process receives scant attention. For example, Julia Wertz’s graphic memoir, *Drinking at the Movies*,

portrays the evolution of her drinking throughout the book, but devotes only one page at the end to her decision to stop drinking. *Hey Kiddo* shows Jarrett visiting Leslie in the halfway house, but it isn't until much later that Leslie describes her recovery to him. There is within the brief recovery storylines a sense of being free and an awakening of previously unrecognized inner strength. Bane, for example, declares, "I am free of Venom. I am truly free for the first time in my life....I didn't need Venom then. I don't need it now."

### **Recovery as an Incremental Process**

American comic books and graphic novels portray addiction recovery as a difficult process often involving multiple efforts before recovery is sustainable. This pattern of repeated recovery attempts is present in the character storylines of Tony Stark (*Ironman*), Roy Harper (*Green Arrow*), Bane, Bruce Wayne (*Batman*), Katina "Katchoo" Choovanski (*Strangers in Paradise*), Carol Danvers (*Avengers, Ironman*), Allan Quartermain (*The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen*), and Rose Wilson (*Teen Titans*). Comic book storylines often portray stable recovery preceded by failed promises and resolutions to stop drug use (Matthew Parker) and by experiments in drug substitution. Matthew Parker (*Larceny in My Blood*) laments, "I'm bent on substituting the slobbering inebriation of alcohol for the nihilism of heroin" before relapsing once again to heroin addiction.

The transition between active addiction and recovery initiation is preceded by elaborate defenses to sustain drug use, e.g., denial,

minimization, rationalization, projection of blame, and anger/aggression. These are elaborately detailed over three years (1998-2000) in the sustained storyline of Carol Danvers crossing over from *Avengers* to *Quicksilver* and *Ironman* and eventually ends with Carol going to AA with Tony. Comic book storylines portray the movement towards recovery as a tortured effort to see oneself and the world as they really are. Regarding the distortions that commonly precede recovery, Willie Seabrook's second wife Marjorie Worthington described Willie's repetitive lies in his written work and in his life: "Willie always told the truth: His truth."

### **Motivation for Recovery**

Momentum for addiction recovery as portrayed in American comic books and graphic novels rises in tandem with the erosion of drug effects, escalating consequences, and experiences within active addiction that serve as a catalyst of recovery. Brandon Novak (*The Brandon Novak Chronicles*) describes the diminishment of drug effects: "But there is one law that every drug fiend is incapable of breaking: The law of diminished returns."

Other push forces toward recovery include fear of loss of one's powers (Dr. Cecilia Reyes) and fear of death if they don't stop and if they do. Willie Seabrook, his drinking at its worst, prophetically writes his publisher, "I think I'll die if I don't stop drinking." Carol Danvers (*Iron Man*) and Rose Wilson (*Teen Titans*) are both told by doctors that continued drug or alcohol use will lead to their deaths. Rose Wilson is told, "...You don't lay off the epinephrine, you'll be dead" because of the damage to

her heart. She's warned of the effects from prolonged epinephrine use including "migraines, tremors, blurred vision. Oxygen deprivation. Heart failure."

Comic books and graphic novels also note positive forces within the addiction experience itself that can serve as push factors toward recovery.

"As devious as we have become, junkies are still capable of emotion, compassion, generosity, and charity. And sometimes we depend on each other to extend kindness, and through this selfless act our humanity can be restored, even if only for a few hours." (*The Brandon Novak Chronicles*)

There are references in comic books and graphic novels to what today would be called "interventions" (e.g., Batman's role in the recovery of Martian Manhunter), there is a surprising lack of references to institutions of control that play such a prominent role in the lives of addicted men and women (e.g., law enforcement, courts, prison, and the child welfare system). In one example we noted (*Hey Kiddo*), Leslie's sobriety is implicitly tied to her time in prison. When she is released on probation and gets a job, her family worries that if she does not stay clean and keep her job she will return to prison. In another example, Carol Danvers (*Avengers*) is court martialed after making serious mistakes due to excessive drinking during a mission. The court martial scene is drawn like an intervention with each Avenger

giving a statement about the impact her alcohol use has had, but she quits *Avengers* before they can demote her.

## Styles of Recovery Initiation

There are varied styles of recovery initiation portrayed in American comic books and graphic novels. Recovery for most is portrayed as an incremental, stage-dependent process—a progressive accumulation of drug-related consequences. The turning point is often depicted as a "hitting bottom" experience. The alcoholic character Wilty in the *Wash Tubbs* comic series proclaims, "I'm through saying I can quit if I have to...I can't. I don't drink any more to get a lift, I drink to stay alive....I'm licked."

An AA member in the graphic novel *Sobriety* laments, "This is the case for many of us. We don't want sobriety until it hurts badly enough." Later, that same AA member notes the varieties of recovery experience: "Different people have different spiritual experiences. A few are sudden and dramatic... A lot of people—in fact, most—have similar experiences [more gradual and prolonged] that come as a result of working the steps."

Comic book and graphic novel storylines where the change process was portrayed as unplanned, positive, and permanent include the character of Bane. While imprisoned in solitary confinement, Bane reviews the traumas of his life (e.g., in prison since his birth, subjected to experimental drugs, victimized by other prisoners) and experiences a vision conveying the message that he had "the strength of innocence to overcome the poison [Venom]." That vision marked the

beginning of his recovery process. There are also examples of altered states of consciousness or sudden epiphanies that marked recovery initiation. Klaus (*The Umbrella Academy*) experienced a vision of himself in a stark white desert where he hears God commanding, “Stay off the drugs, Klaus.” Julia Wertz (*Drinking at the Movies*) experienced a sudden realization that she has been drowning in self-pity and blaming everything but herself for her problems. Matthew Parker, who had resisted NA and AA and varied treatments, had an epiphany in jail that marked his recovery initiation:

“I was totally, irrevocably, utterly in their control and had been for the past 13 years....I wasn’t a thorn in the side of The Man, but rather old meat trapped in his intestines....I therefore decided, right then and there, to quit using. To turn my life around.”

Viewed as a whole, recovery initiation in American comic books and graphic novels is portrayed as an intersection of pain and hope.

### **The Need for Sustained Vigilance**

Even successful recovery, as in the case of Tony Stark (*The Invincible Iron Man*), is accompanied by the need for sustained vigilance against cravings and impulses to use: “It’s always with me...whispering to me.” Holly Robinson in *Catwoman* is constantly reminded of her addiction during the early months of her recovery: “...And I just can’t stop seeing these streets in junkie-vision...Or

noticing how easy it would be to give in...”.

The need for sustained vigilance against impulses to use are well illustrated in the *Wash Tubbs* comic series, as Ben (AA member) describes Wilty’s continued vulnerability during the early days of Wilty’s recovery:

“Let’s get that straight...there is no cure. I’m what we call a permanently arrested case....one of perhaps 50,000 in AA who will never take another drink but we’ll always be alcoholics because we’re still allergic to alcohol. However, we can live normal lives! We’ve quit kidding ourselves that we can ever be social drinkers.”

“Gig’s [Wilty’s] chief danger now is a false sense of security, as he gradually loses his urges to drink. Unless we help him keep his guard up, an emotional upset...fatigue...an impulse to join friends in a “quick one”...or even a sudden piece of good luck could cause a relapse.”

An AA speaker in the graphic novel *Sobriety* shares similar sentiments:

“Addiction isn’t just in our heads—it’s in our bodies and our spirits too. ....As an alcoholic I will always “have it”—but it doesn’t have to have me!”

“There’s no cure as yet—  
It’s a chronic illness that  
needs to be managed, like  
diabetes. But there’s a  
spiritual solution in the  
Twelve Steps.”

## Recovery Support Resources

Recovery was often achieved in American comic books and graphic novels through reliance on resources and relationships beyond the self. Examples of this include Batman’s rescue and detoxification by his assistant Alfred, Captain America detoxing with the aid of Black Widow, the support Tony Stark received from his girlfriend and butler, Theresa Cassidy’s (*X-Force*) recovery with the aid of Warpath, Speedy’s cold turkey withdrawal with aid of Black Canary, and Harry Osborn’s rescue by Spider-Man. In the X-Men series, Dr. Cecilia Reyes achieves recovery after being rescued by the X-Men and through the support of Xavier through her drug withdrawal process. After Carol Danvers achieves sobriety with the aid of Tony Stark, she later helps him when he returns to drinking following revelation of his true identity. After Danvers achieves sobriety, she rejoins the Avengers on the condition that she be supervised and continue her AA involvement.

In the *Catwoman* series, Holly Robinson’s friends Selena and Karon serve as key support to her recovery. Leslie (*Hey Kiddo*) describes how she and her boyfriend support each other’s recovery, “He’s getting treatment, just like me.” (p. 229) ... “Miguel and I are on this road to recovery together.” (p. 230). All five characters in the graphic novel *Sobriety* are involved in a Twelve-Step

program, and one of the characters (Alex) references living in a recovery residence.

While in France, Willie Seabrook asked the famed author Gertrude Stein for guidance on his drinking problem. Her advice was simple: “stop drinking so much and return to writing....You must stop drinking and you must begin to write again.” Following that advice, Willie wrote his publisher in September 1933 asking for help. His publisher responded by making arrangements for Willie to return to America and be admitted to Doctors Hospital under the care of Dr. Alexander Lambert.

## Character Transformation in Recovery

Recovery within American comic books and graphic novels provides an opportunity for the acquisition of new powers and altered qualities of character. Following Bane’s recovery from Venom addiction, he uses this period of isolation to strengthen his body through extreme physical exercise and strengthen his mind through meditation. Many American comic book characters who transitioned from addiction to recovery went on to develop a recovery-focused service ethic. Batman, after his own recovery, was involved in supporting the recoveries of three other characters: Arsenal, Speedy, and The Martian Hunter. Arsenal then goes on to become a drug counselor and law enforcement officer. Batman served as a recovery role model and recovery coach for others. Other examples of such service activities after recovery initiation include Dr. Cecilia Reyes’ volunteer activities at a homeless shelter (*X-Men*) and Karen Page’s

operation of a legal clinic in Hell's Kitchen (*Daredevil*).

Wilty, in the *Wash Tubbs* comic series, reflects on the therapeutic effects of helping others as part of one's own recovery: "I had to call on Ben (AA member) again last night. He took me with him to see a very pathetic case. I think we helped him, but it helped me even more." Holly Robinson in the *Catwoman* series worked undercover to take down drug dealers following her recovery from heroin addiction. Reflecting on this work, she explains, "I can use my life experience to my advantage for a change...And that makes me feel stronger...Prouder."

In the graphic novel *Sobriety*, Dan and Alex describe their lives in recovery

"I once had a life that was destroyed by drugs and alcohol...But I got life back because of the Twelve Steps. It's different than it was before. It isn't perfect...But it's full of surprises. And it's worthwhile... Sobriety is more than the definition we find in a dictionary. It's a new lifestyle that we embrace. It gives us real existence."

"Now, I've left that life. I'm selling fine automobiles in London. And I'm happier than ever."

Matthew Parker (*Larceny in my Blood*) described channeling his propensity for excess into his recovery process, using education as a pathway to

recovery: "Being an excellent student also makes it easier to stay clean. I now channel my compulsion into more productive activities. Compared to the hard work involved in being a junkie, becoming an honor student is ridiculously easy." Describing his experience in college and his writing aspirations, Parker describes the irony of his new circumstances: "Credit [to pay for school] is my new heroin, and debt its walls and razor wire."

### **The Role of Recovery Mutual Aid Groups**

The supportive role of recovery mutual aid groups was limited exclusively to Twelve-Step groups (Alcoholics Anonymous) within American comic books and graphic novels that contained addiction storylines.

Characters seeking recovery through AA include Tony Stark, Carol Danvers, Katina ("Katchoo") Choovanski, and five characters in the graphic novel *Sobriety*. Tony Stark and Carol Danvers even go to the same AA meetings in multiple issues. In *Iron Man: Resolutions* #313, Tony spends New Year's Eve at an AA meeting reflecting on his early exposure to alcohol as a pre-teen and current struggles with alcoholism. The role of an AA sponsor is portrayed through the character of Dr. Black, who serves as Ruben's (*Buzzkill*) sponsor:

"The rest [beyond admitting you have a problem] is going to be tough, but I'll be here to guide you. I've been through this before. It's not impossible, Man."

All five characters in the graphic novel *Sobriety* were involved in a Twelve-Step program. Larry noted his early perceptions of rehab and AA: “Look at rehabs: They’re invested on getting reimbursement from health insurance companies—the very same companies that require a medical treatment. It seems to me that the Twelve Steps are about something else; it’s like a cult!”

Several characters report getting sober through the help of other AA members. The character Matt (*Sobriety*) describes how the Twelve-Step program works:

“The problem is easy: we have a disease of the body that causes us to lose control when we drink or drug, and an obsession of the mind that causes us to drink and drug. That’s the powerlessness that step one describes...The solution to that irreconcilable dilemma is that the other steps give us a way to restore purpose and meaning to our lives.”

Resistance to Twelve-Step programs was portrayed via the character of Matthew Parker in *Larceny in My Blood*. At one of his parole hearings, Parker declares: “Well, I’ll tell you what I won’t do. I won’t go to NA meetings, or AA meetings, or any of that other crap.” (He was then paroled based on his honesty). In speaking of a later parole hearing, he recalls: “I told them what I really thought of their rehabilitation policies and 12-Step programs in particular. I just think it’s all bullshit.”

There were no references to secular, spiritual, or religious recovery mutual aid alternatives to Twelve-Step programs in the comic books and graphic novels we reviewed. Given the national and international growth and diversification of alternative groups such as Women for Sobriety, SMART Recovery, LifeRing Secular Recovery, Celebrate Recovery, and numerous others, it is somewhat surprising that they have yet to appear within comic book and graphic novel addiction storylines.

### **Portrayal of Addiction Treatment**

The representation of addiction treatment in American comic books is limited. Natural recovery is far more common than professional treatment, and comic book storylines offer few details related to the actual nature of treatment beyond medical withdrawal. In spite of the portrayal of opioid addiction in numerous storylines, there is little portrayal of the pharmacotherapy of opioid addiction. Recovery most often involved heroic rescue or was portrayed as an isolated episode that when shaken off allows other storylines to proceed without continued references to a recovery process. Below are the few treatment references we located.

In the *Batman* series, there are references to Doctor Leslie Thompkins and Tiffany Fox operating addiction treatment programs without reference to what such treatment involved. The DC Fandom Wiki explains, “Doctor Thompkins ran the free Thomas Wayne Memorial Clinic for criminals and drug addicts in Gotham City. While the majority of her patients were repeat offenders, she continued to do her job with great perseverance and

determination.” Dr. Thompson later ceased her helping role and became a vigilante.

There are numerous examples over multiple decades of Tony Stark seeking treatment for alcoholism, however they rarely show details of what that treatment entailed. In *Iron Man: Deliverance* #182, Tony is admitted to a hospital for detoxification and later shown attending AA meetings. In *Vengeance of Bane*, the psychiatrist Dr. Flanders, who Bane saw while in prison, is portrayed as empathic and skilled.

The character Leslie in *Hey Kiddo* references going to a clinic after her release from prison and getting involved with another patient there: “He’s getting treatment, just like me....Miguel and I are on this road to recovery together.” She relapses and later dies of a heroin overdose. Alex (*Sobriety*) entered a government-sponsored rehab for four weeks following an overdose. He warmly describes his counselor, who introduces him to the Twelve Steps: “David was a guy who listened—really listened—to me. He was in recovery himself. And he let me see the truth of my life: that it had spun out of control and was insane.”

The most detailed of addiction treatment appears in *The Abominable Mr. Seabrook*. William Seabrook’s physician admitted him to Doctors Hospital, dried him out with the aid of “prescription booze”, and then discharged him as cured. The images of this episode show Seabrook looking through bars. Following his discharge from Doctors Hospital, he immediately returned to heavy drinking and was subsequently committed to the Bloomingdale Insane Asylum. Seabrook was a challenging patient, often objecting

to various rules of the institution. Treatment at Bloomingdale consisted of “cold turkey” withdrawal from alcohol, hydrotherapy (baths and wetpacks), and psychotherapy to address his “addictive personality” and his sexual perversions. Seabrook was discharged after seven months and later detailed his experience there in his book *Asylum*. At the end of *Asylum*, he proclaimed himself cured, that he could now drink without excesses of the past and that he had conquered his writer’s block. “I’m now able to take a drink or two without desiring another and I seem to be cured of drunkenness.” Seabrook’s drinking again raged out of control.

Matthew Parker provides the most detailed account of treatment resistance in his graphic memoir, *Larceny in my Blood*. Parker describes being ordered into a halfway house by a judge: “I was allowed to go to work and report back to the rehab each night, which made it easy to maintain my habit.” When arrested for failing a drug test, he “played the contrite junkie.” At a later 28-day rehab, he sarcastically describes his superficial compliance: “Oh, yes, I’ve seen the light. Hit rock bottom. I’m powerless over my addiction. I have to give it away to keep it.” Then released to Maverick House, he described feeling like he was “being conned.”

## **On Addiction Recurrence**

Addiction recurrence following a period of recovery is described in several comic book and graphic novel storylines. Carol Danvers experienced a recurrence of drinking at a time she is struggling with writer’s block. Another time, she follows the Avengers into a bar on a mission commenting that she will need to stay



vigilant to avoid another recurrence. Tony Stark experienced multiple relapses across his many storylines. Below is scene from *Ironman: Demon in the Bottle* that offers a typical depiction of the tensions that often precede a recurrence:

“For days, the stalemate rages—until at long last, emotional blocks begin to crack, then crumble—and Tony Stark spills his pent-up pain like milk from a spilt pail. He sighs, he shudders...and he shakes.” The purge helps and he returns to work. He apologizes to Jarvis saying he has “a handle on it now,” and Jarvis responds, “You have an illness. I quite understand.” While he’s at the Avenger’s mansion, Tony knows there’s a bottle in his room but says, “I don’t need the booze...I can handle this on my own without any counterfeit courage at all.” Later back at the mansion, Tony starts to pour a drink and Beth stops him. His face is sweating, eyes are down, he’s frowning, his hands are shaking. It’s described as the “hardest battle of his life.” Beth reminds him of his life’s dream, and shaking he recaps the bottle.

The self-talk that feeds addiction recurrence is vividly displayed in *The Abominable Mr. Seabrook*. Following treatment and a period of sobriety,

Seabrook tires of the sober life and proclaims: “I’m tired of being a cripple. From now on, I’m going to prove that I can take a drink or leave it alone, like any other man.” After losing control over his drinking again, he would pledge sobriety anew but soon became bored and commence his drinking binges. His repeated refrain when talking to himself in the mirror: “What do drunkards do? They drink themselves to death.” At a later stage of his story, Seabrook’s lover and third wife-to-be plunged his hands in boiling water to scald the skin so that he would be unable to pick up a drink. Seabrook continues drinking from a liquor bottle using a straw. He was committed to the Hudson State Hospital in mid-1945. A few months later and after his release, Seabrook committed suicide with sleeping pills and whiskey on September 20, 1945.

Brandon Novak (*The Brandon Novak Chronicles*) re-experienced heroin addiction after publishing his book, *Dreamseller*, in which he recounted losing his career as a professional skater due to his heroin addiction. In his graphic memoir, he describes coming back from his “insatiable appetite for heroin.”

### **Addiction, Recovery, and the Family**

An area of scant attention in the addictions storylines of American comic books and graphic novels is the effect of addiction upon the family or the involvement of affected families in family support groups or addiction treatment. The few conclusions that can be drawn related to family include the following.

Addiction inflicts repeated episodes of humiliation, helplessness, worry, guilt, anger, and loss on the family

(*The Abominable Mr. Seabrook; Drinking at the Movies, Hey Kiddo*).

Addiction can become so imbedded within the marital relationship that recovery may pose more of a threat to the relationship than continued addiction. Willie Seabrook's second wife reveals, "I confess, Willie had handled the teetotaling better than I did."

Sustained family support can play a crucial role in addiction recovery. Jarrett's grandfather (*Hey Kiddo*) purchases a house for Leslie when she finishes the release program to support her new sobriety. Matthew Parker in *Larceny in my Blood* recounts such support:

"But as pissed as she [his mother] was, I always had a place to live. She was too kind and I used her.... At 41 years old and on my fifth trip to prison, she [mother] saw no reason for hope...But my mom never gave up on me—I think because our shared struggles showed how bad it could get....We were still family, not despite but because of all that we had lost."

Sustained recovery brings indescribable relief to the family. Again, Matthew Parker reflects:

"She [mother] was not convinced of my commitment to kick heroin until a year after my release, during my second

semester at SCC....I think that was the first time in 40 years that my mom could relax."

## Closing Reflections

Comic books and graphic novels provide a unique vehicle to convey information about addiction, addiction treatment, and addiction recovery. We envision a day when research scientists and recovery advocates will collaborate with the creators of American comic books and graphic novels to create more science-based and recovery-focused portrayals of alcohol and other drug problems.

One of the initial challenges faced by addicted individuals and their family members is answering questions that mark the starting point of recovery: Who was I before I became addicted? Why and how did I become addicted? What has my addiction cost me? What will it take to recover my old life or discover a new life? One can look to many sources for answers to such questions and find possible answers in unexpected places, including in American comic books and graphic novels. This suggests interesting possibilities for future collaborations between addiction scientists, clinicians, and recovery advocates and the writers and graphic artists who portray addiction and recovery within the growing legions of American comics and graphic novels.

The addictions field has historically been dominated by theoretical siloes that each proposed a primary causative pathway of addiction, a common course of progression of the disorder, a narrow approach to treatment, and a singular regimen of successful recovery maintenance. Such

siloed views are giving way to more nuanced understandings of the multiple pathways of addiction entrance and egress that differ across clinical populations and cultural contexts. In our review of the portrayal of factors of addiction vulnerability in American comic books, we found many such noted influences. In future blogs in this series, we will explore how these same media portray addiction consequences and pathways of addiction recovery.

American comic books and graphic novels have revealed perceived roots and consequences of addiction within their storylines. The depth and texture of such portrayals could increase through collaboration between addiction professionals, recovery advocates, and the authors and illustrators of comic books and graphic novels.

While limited in the range and depth of storylines, American comic books and graphic novels have portrayed recovery as part of addiction-related storylines, including the motivations for recovery, styles of recovery initiation, and the potential of recovery as a medium of personal transformation and service to others. The portrayal of the role of recovery mutual aid organizations in the process of addiction recovery is limited within the storylines of American comic books and graphic novels to Twelve-Step fellowships. In spite of their recent growth in the U.S. and internationally, the existence of secular, spiritual, and religious mutual aid alternatives have yet to be portrayed. Addiction treatment is briefly referenced within the addiction storylines of American comic books and graphic novels without substantial details related to the nature of such treatment or its degree of effectiveness. Addiction

recurrence following an initial recovery attempt is common within the addiction storylines, with trajectories ranging from death to a final re-stabilization of recovery. American comic books and graphic novels have yet to fully portray the effects of addiction on the family and the processes, stages, and long-term effects of family recovery from addiction.

We anticipate a future in which collaborations between addiction professionals, recovery advocates, and the writers and illustrators will produce a new generation of addiction storylines within American comic books and graphic novels that more accurately portray the prevalence, pathways, stages, and styles of long-term addiction recovery.

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## **Appendix**

### **Comic Books and Graphic Literature with Addiction/Recovery Storylines**

#### **Comic Book Characters**

[Character Name, Codename(s) (Series Name, Volume or issue #, year)]

\*Alphabetical by character's last name

Bane (Batman, Vengeance of Bane, Special #1)

Billy Batson, Captain Marvel (Justice League)

Tandy Bowen (Cloak & Dagger, Spectacular Spiderman, #64, 1982)

Eli Bradley, Patriot (Young Avengers, Vol. 1, #1, 2005)

Theresa Maeve Rourke Cassidy, Siryn / Banshee (X-Men, X-Force #31, 1994)

Katina "Katchoo" Choovanski, none (Strangers in Paradise, Sanctuary, Vol. 7, 2009)

Carol Danvers, Captain Marvel (Avengers, Iron Man, ongoing)

Steve Dayton, Mento (Doom Patrol)

Klaus Hargreeves (The Umbrella Academy, ongoing)

Roy Harper, Speedy/Arsenal (Green Arrow/Green Lantern, Vol. 12, #85-86, 1971)

Tyrone Johnson (Cloak & Dagger, Spectacular Spiderman #64, 1982)

Jessica Jones, none (Alias, ongoing)

J'onn J'onzz, The Martian Manhunter (The Martian Manhunter, ongoing)

Kal-El, Ultraman, (The New 52, Forever Evil #1, 2013)

Laura Kinney, X-23 (X-23)

Henry Philip "Hank" McCoy, Beast (X-Men, Amazing Adventures Vol 2. #11, 1972)

Jack Monroe, Bucky/Nomad (Captain America #345, 1988)

Michael Morbius, The Living Vampire (Spider-Man)

Harry Osborn, Green Goblin (The Amazing Spider-Man #96-98, 1971)

Karen Page (Daredevil #227-232, 1987)

Allan Quatermain (The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen Vol 1, 1999)  
Danny Rand, Ironfist (Immortal Iron Fist #1, 2006)  
Cecelia Reyes, none (X-Men #101-113, 2000-2001)  
Holly Robinson, none (Catwoman, Crooked Little Town, 2003)  
Steve Rogers, Captain America (Captain America)  
Ruben (Buzzkill, 2013)  
Marc Spector, Moon Knight (Moon Knight #1, Vol 5, 2006)  
Tony Stark, Ironman (Ironman, Avengers, ongoing)  
Starfire (Teen Titans, Red Hood and the Outlaws, #1 and #36, 2011)  
Eugene "Flash" Thompson, Agent Venom (Spectacular Spider-man 249-250, 1997, Amazing Spider-man # 654, 1999)  
Rex Tyler, Hourman (# 48 Adventure Comics, 1940)  
Richard "Rick" Tyler, Hourman II (Infinity Inc. #31, 1986)  
Wash Tubbs (April 4-May 14, 1949; Daily newspaper comic strip from 1924 to 1949)  
Bruce Wayne, Batman (Batman, Dark Knight #16, 1993)  
Rose Wilson, Ravager (Teen Titans, #72-73, 2009)

### **Graphic Novels/Biographies/ Memoirs**

John "Derf" Backderf (My Friend Dahmer)  
Jarrett J. Krosoczka (Hey Kiddo)  
Daniel D. Maurer and Spenser Amundson (Sobriety: A Graphic Novel)  
Brandon Novak (The Brandon Novak Chronicles)  
Joe Ollman (The Abominable Mr. Seabrook)  
Matthew Parker (Larceny in My Blood)  
Marjane Satrapi (Persepolis 2 The story of a return)  
Julia Wertz (Drinking at the Movies, The Infinite Wait and Other Stories)  
David Wheatley (Qualification: A Graphic Memoir in Twelve Steps)

### **Graphic Non-Fiction**

Cannabis: The Illegalization of Weed in America (Box Brown)