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Who?

From the late 1980s onwards, Christine-Jane Wilson (†2016) drew cartoons about cross-dressing for magazines such as *Transgender Tapestry* and later for sites like *tgforum.com*. She donated a collection of her cartoons to the British Cartoon Archive (BCA) at the University of Kent. In correspondence, she recalls that “for many years, before I came to terms with it, being a transvestite was the one thing I thought I would never, EVER be able to laugh about. Since accepting myself for what I am, I’ve produced the books you now have in front of you” (Letter to BCA curator).

What?

Is There a TV in the House (1996) is one of the self-published book(let)s in the BCA. It collects some of her cartoons about crossdressers in funny but awkward situations. Although they are not illness narratives, the cartoons address experiences of mental ill health and social marginalization. Wilson was “always conscious of [her] 40 years of mental turmoil” (2002, 25).

Why?

For Wilson, cartooning was a strategy for good mental health. She explains that, “[a]ll my life, the main savior of my sanity has been my sense of humor. When I grew depressed, if I feared ridicule or rejection, eventually the funny side would hit me and I’d be able to laugh and climb out of the depression. (...) [By cartooning,] I was able to find humor in being a transvestite” (2002, 25). She also hoped her cartoons “give others [fellow crossdressers] a laugh about something they thought they would never be able to laugh at” (2002, 25).

Coping

Wilson’s humour serves as a kind of emotion-focused coping, which reframes the emotional response to a problematic person-environment relationship (Lazarus 1991, 112). Joking about the social transgression of crossdressing, she does not ignore it, but reappraises her emotional response. Instead of depression, her social transgression now causes amusement.

Form

The aesthetic form of Wilson’s cartoons as jokes is crucial to this coping process. Jenefer Robinson explains that “formal or structural devices in literature [can] play the role of coping mechanisms” because they serve to reappraise content that is initially appraised as emotionally challenging (2004, 196). Thus, the joke-form of Wilson’s cartoons contains the emotionally painful content, as the transgression of crossdressing becomes a setup for an amusing and therefore harmless punchline.

Humour

Wilson’s jokes structure around incongruities involved in two prototypical scenarios, i.e. the anxiety of public exposure (fig. 1) and the desire for social acceptance (fig. 2). The force of comedy is that it can emotionally reappraise an otherwise disturbing normative incongruity. Humour results from “a deviation from some presupposed norm” which should be “neither threatening nor anxiety producing nor annoying but which can, on the contrary, be enjoyed” (Carroll 2014, 17/34). To be amused, one “must regard the incongruity not as a source of anxiety but rather as an opportunity to relish its absurdity” (Ibid., 29).



Christine-Jane Wilson

Conclusions

- Christine-Jane Wilson’s cartoons address experiences of mental ill health outside a strictly medical context.
- The cartoons showcase how humour can function as a coping strategy.
- Humour promotes coping in a complex fashion. It is not simply a cathartic release. Instead, the form and structure of jokes can contain and reappraise a painful person-environment relationship.
- Humour’s unique role in coping is the playful reframing of normative incongruity.

References

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Fig. 1



Fig. 2

<https://blogs.kent.ac.uk/comedy-mental-health>

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