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## Sporkling

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SPORKLING

by

Mia Jensen

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree

of

MASTER OF SCIENCE

in

English

Approved:

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Benjamin Gunsberg, Ph.D.  
Committee Chair

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UTAH STATE UNIVERSITY  
Logan, Utah

2021

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## ABSTRACT

## Sporkling

by

Mia Jensen, Master of Science

Utah State University, 2022

Major Professor: Dr. Benjamin Gunsberg  
Department: English

For my thesis, I wrote and illustrated a graphic short story that captures the confusing experiences associated with aging out of childhood. My thesis, titled “Sporkling,” follows a twelve-year-old girl named Moira as she confronts her fears with the help of the recently thawed disembodied head of the quirky nineteenth-century inventor, Samuel W. Francis. The central topics of the project reflect on the unification of the body and mind. Whereas the young, naïve Moira represents the body, the disillusioned, decapitated Samuel represents the mind. As the two spend an afternoon trapped in Moira’s father’s secret laboratory, they must assist each other and learn what it truly means to be human. I chose to depict this story in graphic form because the genre itself captures the essence of the underlying topic: Union. By merging visuals and text, I more efficiently communicate with my young audience and reflect the story’s message.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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I would also like to give special thanks to my husband Jonathan Ambrose and my family for their continuous support and empathy as I worked towards and completed this thesis.

I would lastly like to thank all those who contributed to the technical and logistical necessities that correlated with the completion of this thesis. Thank you to the Utah State English Department, the College of Humanities and Social Sciences, and all those who continue to keep the department running smoothly.

Mia Jensen

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## CHAPTER I: CRITICAL INTRODUCTION

### **Introduction**

I knew I wanted to write a graphic thesis as soon as I read my graduate acceptance email. As a child, I developed mediocre artistic abilities but felt captured by the movement within a picture. I sketched the movement of a bouncing ball on dollar store sticky notepads and flipped my thumb across the pale-yellow pages. I watched the ball appear at the top of the page, fall to the bottom, and flatten under the force of the drawing before springing back to the top. Although my artistic abilities fell behind my capabilities as a writer, I maintained a fascination with the rhetorical benefits of visual narrative coupled with text. As I readied myself to begin this graduate program, I knew I wanted to push past my lackluster artistic talent to create a charming coming of age story told through visual narrative styles.

The central topic of my thesis corresponds with the merging genres: coming together. The story features two protagonists with opposite attributes. As the two are trapped together, they must look beyond their intuitive forms of thinking and gain empathy for each other. By doing so, the two protagonists metaphorically unite the mind and the body. Where Samuel, a disembodied head, represents ego, Moira, a twelve-year-old American girl, lacks any recognition of the self. She blindly follows rules and rarely considers her own preferences. Samuel is overly confident in his abilities while Moira doesn't know if she has abilities. Samuel is dynamic, bombastic, and domineering. Moira is static, reserved, and timid. The concealed environment forces the characters to let go of their own mental restrictions and embrace new ideas. This thesis is designed to be an

intersection of themes and genres to create a cohesive representation of young adolescence.

Like most artistic endeavors, this thesis has taken many different shapes and appearances. Throughout the drafting and drawing processes, I have composed, drawn, and subsequently deleted over sixty pages of content. The final product scarcely resembles the original story I set out to create. As an experienced fiction writer, I originally began organizing the plot, characters, and central themes I wanted to highlight. When I approach writing projects, plan each story element and character detail before drafting. After writing and drawing two complete drafts, I realized this technique does not naturally transfer to the visual medium. The visuals are the most memorable and dynamic component of the genre. Writing elements like plot, pace, and character development require additional attention when implementing graphics. Earlier drafts were plot driven, action-oriented, science fiction stories involving the end of the world and diabolical mole people. Although a compelling story, the plot progressed too quickly, and the story failed to communicate narrative essentials like world details and character motivations. Without the comfort of the traditional written fiction form, I had to relearn these basics. Ultimately, I split the project in half to spend more time cultivating tone, theme, and character progressions. By reducing plot and worldbuilding intricacies, I created a cohesive story with two genuine characters at its heart.

I hope that this more pared-down story can give audiences the chance to reflect within themselves and to emotionally connect with the two characters. I believe all creative writing projects are semi-autobiographical regardless of genre. I am at the root of both Sam and Moira. Although the characters were created to represent an idea, I hope

readers might identify themselves within the fears and motivations of the protagonists. As connection is at the center, I want to give readers the opportunity to connect with the characters, ideas, genre, and emotions circulating through this story.

### **The Rhetoric of Grayscale**

Comics have a long history of grayscale or using various shades of gray. Mangas, for example, are comics and graphic novels that are almost exclusively printed in black and white. Economic factors are large components when considering color or grayscale, however, artists choose to include the gray color scheme for many other rhetorical purposes. The popular early 2000s comic *The Walking Dead* is printed in black and white to allow the type of gore and violence the horror genre demands without risking censorship. Although the comic's creator Robert Kirkman has offered sparse commentary on the rhetorical choice, fans have speculated on *Screenrant* and *DenOfGeek* that the comic excluded vibrant reds and mutilated greens for widespread publication. The grayscale allowed audiences to engage with the content without censorship or additional concern for sensitive viewers. My thesis utilizes grayscale for rhetorical and economic purposes, although the reasons differ from the purposes of traditional manga and *The Walking Dead*.

I chose to utilize grayscale due to time and the rhetorical benefits of a colorless narrative. Logistically, completing the story in color would be an unrealistic goal. Incorporating a compatible color scheme would have taken too much time. However, the grayscale technique I chose to employ folds appropriately into the story, characters, and themes. Gray is a neutral color, existing on the spectrum of black and white. As white is

the absorption of all colors and black is the absence of color, gray is the essential medium between existence and nonexistence. The middle ground effect can also pose an aura of mystery to the shade. It is ambiguous, unclear, hazy. To be shrouded in fog is to be in a layer of gray. Enoch Brater elaborates on the versatility of gray in his article “Beckett’s Shades of the Color Gray.” Brater states that gray is “an endpoint that is always on the verge of becoming something else again. Gray is both the beginning and end, diminution as well as potential, ashes but also fertile—very fertile” (103). The multidimensionality of gray presents a constant state of uncertainty, a feeling young Moira is all too familiar with.

The artistic renderings within my thesis utilize a variety of grays, and swing on the scale all the way to black and reverse to white. On a character level, the abrupt contrast of black ink on a white background represents Moira’s naivety. She is a black and white thinker who resents encouragement to broaden her mindset. She is uncomfortable merging ideas and prefers to interpret the world as if it were black and white. She follows orders as they are presented to her and fears interpreting the world through her own lens. However, Samuel’s character sits comfortably in the middle of the spectrum between black and white. In life, Samuel brought distinct tangible objects together to create something new and unique. As a reanimated head, he helps Moira expand her understanding. Samuel’s mysterious reanimation embodies gray as well. Neither Samuel nor Moira know why Samuel was removed from his body, preserved for over a century, and brought back to life. They are also unaware as to the reason Samuel awoke in the company of the world’s most advanced thinkers and innovators. The

purpose behind Samuel's existence evokes the ambiguity of gray just as his perspectives resonate with the gray spectrum.

In addition to the grayscale representing the characters, the black to white spectrum connects the themes as well. As unity rests at the heart of this project, gray is the perfect marriage of contradicting forces. White and black: what is all, and what is nothing. The coming together of opposing forces is uncomfortable and difficult. The story does not end with the characters finding a solution to their problems, but rather the characters find solace in the gray. Problems and solutions promote the binary thought process my character push past. Instead, they learn to find satisfaction in the uncomfortable, the unsolvable, the gray. Brater states, "gray as a verb, as a noun, as an adjective, as a process—evoke an enigmatic world that is neutral and unstable. An intermediate zone fading from darkness to light, then suddenly back again" (103). The characters and themes share the symbolic meanings of gray.

### **Cryogenics and Disembodied Heads**

My two protagonists offer commentary into the greater themes of unity and navigating liminal space. The story's lead protagonist find herself in the company of the disembodied, recently reanimated head of the eccentric, nineteenth-century inventor, Samuel Francis. Where Moira provides Samuel with material assistance, Samuel acts as Moira's guide to intellectual liberation. For centuries, the head has represented intellect, desire, and the soul. Samuel's head is the manifestation of the ego. He is clever, witty, and open minded, yet disillusioned, detached, and unstable.

Without a body, Samuel is the manifestation of concentrated intellect. Humans have had a been fascinated with heads and their separation from the body for centuries. In her book *Severed*, Frances Larson attempts to identify the reasons behind this intrigue. She states, “The human head...accommodates four of the five senses, sight, smell, hearing, and taste all take place in the head. It encases the brain, the core of our nervous system” (11). As the head contains the ways in which humans interpret the world, there exists a blurry line between the head and the self.

The head isolated from the body has multiple representations throughout history. The 2013 book, *Disembodied Heads in Medieval and Early Modern Culture*, edited by Catrien Santing, Barbara Baert, and Anita Traninger states that, “severing the head usually implies putting a creature to death, denying them further existence” (22). A severed head often serves as a warning that death is yet to come. It implies that death has already occurred, and if action or lack of action is or is not taken, more death will arrive. The severed heads in my story act as an opposite. Removed from the body, the heads represent the materialization of intellect and creativity. Samuel’s detached head symbolizes rebirth after death rather than the promise of continuous death.

My thesis oversimplifies the intricate cryonic process, but it maintains the discussions and theories circulating within the cryogenic conversation. According to the 2019 study, “Worldwide Cryonics Attitudes About the Body, Cryopreservation, and Revival: Personal Identify Malleability and a Theory of Cryonic Life Extension” conducted by Melanie Swan, “About 300 people have been cryopreserved, and an additional 1200 have enrolled in such programs” (699). The process involves freezing the recently deceased in liquid nitrogen under the assumption that future technology can one

day restore life to the body. Swan's survey participants stated that it is crucial to preserve the brain as opposed to recreating a digital copy created through photos (704) and "only my actual brain can be me" (706). These attitudes regarding the brain support the concept of the head as the self symbolically portrayed throughout my thesis. The reanimation of cryopreserved heads represent a new era of technology, of information. The fact that Samuel lives means the society has entered a new innovative era that prioritizes traditional intelligence over bodily intelligence. Moira's role in the story is to portray how the body can contribute to the human experience.

### **Intended Audience**

My intended audience is children ages ten to fourteen. I want to reach audiences who themselves are living in a state of gray. The jump from child to preteen is awkward and difficult, and I want my story to represent the challenges preteens face as they begin aging out of childhood. The story itself captures its audience by its relatable characters and grounded absurdity. Moira is flawed but lovable. She knows she doesn't have everything figured out and turns to authority when she is pressed into a tight spot. Yet she isn't quick to trust. She is stubborn but doesn't know why she refuses to budge. She resists self-exploration for fear of what lies at her core. She prefers comfortable obedience to uncomfortable action.

Moira's genuine nature is meant to attract audiences while Samuel's silliness is meant to draw in audiences. My hope is that the sheer absurdity of Samuel's existence and accomplishments will excite and entice audiences. Whereas Moira is apprehensive and cautious, Samuel is enthusiastic and daring. He can't be bothered by the concerns of

the material world and exists in contemplation. However, Samuel is not simply comic relief. He manages to ground himself enough to help Moira work through her crisis. By watching Moira overcome her fears, Samuel learns to identify his regrets. Samuel is a ridiculous character, yet his humor does not overshadow his representation of genuine human experience.

I also hope to reach the audience through the genre itself. The blending of text and visual representation can give audiences a more comprehensive perspective. In their article, “Reading Pictures: Developing Visual Literacy for Greater Comprehension,” Kathleen O’Niel elaborates on the benefits of visual reading. They state, “As children become more adept at decoding the implications of illustrations... they can derive increasing levels of nuanced complexity in the story” (215). Including visual components gives audiences with varying reading and learning styles more opportunities to understand and conceptualize the story.

### **Influences**

This project, like all artistic projects, has innumerable influences, however there are four core influences that primarily guided this story: Vera Brosgol, Luke Pearson, Noelle Stevenson, and T.K.S. Desikachar. I found the work of Pearson and Stevenson through their accomplishments in animation. It is not uncommon for graphic novelists to work in television before pursuing their own writing endeavors. After watching the emotionally charged animated series these authors created, I purchased their independent works. My early encounters with these authors taught me how efficiently middle-grade fiction can guide children as they transition into young teenagers. Ironically, I did not

read these authors when I was the intended audience. Instead, I watched and read their content after spending four years analyzing narratives as an English student. This analytical skill helped me recognize these writer's admirable qualities and how I can replicate their skills. One influence, Desikachar, is the outlier among the others. While the first three are all graphic novelists, Desikachar was a yoga practitioner and writer. Brosgol, Pearson, and Stevenson inspired the story's characters, plot, and design, but Desikachar's teachings sparked the topic of unity. Together, these authors gave me the tools and techniques I required to write my thesis.

### *Vera Brosgol*

Vera Brosgol's use of bubbly visual styles and awkward coming of age themes make her one of my key influences. Brosgol moved to the United States after spending the first five years of her life in Russia (*Verabee*). Her stories largely feature young Russian American girls attempting to find themselves amongst their peers. Brosgol's female protagonists are lovably awkward and accurately capture the desires, fears, and motives of real girls. When I wrote Moira, I wanted her to reflect these characteristics as well. Like Brosgol, I didn't want to write a caricature or archetype that loosely resembles young girls, I wanted a relatable female protagonist with realistic strengths and weaknesses. Brosgol utilizes the conventions of the graphic genre to depict her character's flaws and shame. Her first graphic novel, *Anya's Ghost*, features a young Russian girl who worries she doesn't fit in with her fellow students. Brosgol uses a series of side-by-side panels and thought bubbles to allow the audience to feel Anya's shame and concern with her.



Figure 1 Brosgol, Vera. *Anya's Ghost*. First Second. 2011. pp.48

Anya's facial expressions, body positions, and interaction with the mirror express her emotions better than a speech bubble or caption box could. I want to give Moira the same freedom to display her insecurities through her actions and expressions rather than through her explicit dialogue.

Like my thesis, *Anya's Ghost* is illustrated in a black and gray hue. In Brosgol website, *Verabee*, she states, "I did all the colors... in different values of purpley-blue for no other reason than I like purpley-blue and I think it feels right for the story" (*Verabee*). While she does not elaborate on the specific intricacies of the palette, the shades are "right for the story" in ways similar to my thesis. Coming of age stories, especially those targeted towards children, often embellish the story in loud, vibrant colors. However, a gray or blue scale can capture the more intimate and complicated nuances of growing up and the ambiguity associated with exiting childhood. As Anya

and Moira are challenged to grow and adapt, they come out the other end better equipped to handle the difficulties of their worlds.

### *Luke Pearson*

I was first introduced to Luke Pearson through his contribution to the Netflix animated series *Hilda* inspired by Pearson's graphic novels of the same name. After viewing Pearson's Netflix series, I further investigated his novels and comics. My initial intrigue arose from Pearson's ability to depict the motivations of children in a compelling way. Pearson achieves this by fully utilizing the visual genre. In *Hilda and the Troll*, the protagonist Hilda presents herself in danger multiple times as she strays far from home, confronts trolls, and tackles forest giants. Pearson emphasizes Hilda's enthusiasm for adventure by creating movement in the visuals.



Figure 2 Pearson, Luke. *Hilda and the Troll*. Nobrow. 2010.

The panel above shows Hilda's frantic behavior through her postures and facial expressions. Allowing the audience into character's interiority is a difficult task when

writing any creative piece, however the graphic genre presents specific challenges. Including thought bubbles or caption blocks can risk incongruent pacing between panels and can detach the reader from the immersive reading experience. The audience does not need to know explicitly what Hilda is thinking in the moments of the panels because we can see it all on her face.

Within Pearson's work, the stakes are clearly outlined by utilizing dialogue boxes to voice Hilda's concern and by using panel organization to emphasize conflict. When Hilda is lost in the snow, one panel is dedicated entirely to a close shot of her terrified face. These stakes are complemented by Pearson's use of bulbous character designs and bright colors. These childlike features do not dull the stakes or tension but create a compatibility between the novel's young audience and the creation of genuine concern. Hilda and Moira have little in common. Hilda is a promiscuous troublemaker while Moira is a timid rule abider. Although Pearson created an entirely different character, I was drawn to his ability to visually depict the attitudes of a young girl.

### *ND Stevenson*

ND Stevenson is another influence who produced a critically acclaimed Netflix animated series. In addition to their work on the Netflix series *She-Ra and the Princess of Power*, Stevenson has also published two award winning graphic novels, *Lumberjanes* and *Nimona*. I include Stevenson as an influence because of their ability to portray complex female characters and their inclusion of LGBTQ+ characters. Stevenson's work predominantly features unconventional female protagonists.

Stevenson's young female characters are not designed to accentuate femininity or sexuality.



Figure 3 Stevenson, Noelle. *Nimona*. Harper Collins Publishers, 2015.

The graphic space offers audiences the chance to digest content that portrays diverse characters. The children's literature scholar Rudine Sims Bishop elaborates in her groundbreaking essay, "Mirrors, Windows, and Sliding Glass Doors" by stating, "When children cannot find themselves reflected in the books they read, or when the images they see are distorted, negative, or laughable, they learn a powerful lesson about how they are devalued in the society of which they are a part" (9). While Stevenson's characters often lack racial diversity, they do often break heteronormative standards. Laura B. Smolkin and Craig A. Young call for greater LGBTQ youth representation in children's literature in their article "Missing Mirrors, Missing Windows: Children's Literature and Textbooks and LGBT Topics." Smolkin and Young state that many LGBTQ youth are denied [their] rights" to view themselves through their literature because of those who still contest LGBTQ representation (217). As a member of the LGBTQ community, Stevenson creates

strong-willed and determined characters that reflect their community. My final draft contains two presumably heteronormative characters, however as I continue to experiment with the graphic genre, I want to learn from Stevenson's ability to depict underrepresented characters.

*T.K.V Desikachar*

Desikachar, a well-known yoga practitioner, may appear to be the most out of place among my influences. Unlike the other influences, I did not actively return to his works when composing this thesis. I did not pour over his work to learn his writing strategies or techniques. However, his teachings and philosophies are rooted within the themes of my story. I first read his book, *The Heart of Yoga*, as an undergraduate minoring in yoga studies. Nearly every yoga studies class I enrolled in required the yoga guide. Desikachar discusses the basics of yoga, both the physical practice and the philosophy behind the ancient practice. I consider Desikachar's teachings to be the foundation for my understandings of yogic principles. Because I enrolled in the yoga studies program the same semester I declared myself an English major, yoga will always influence my writing to some degree. The concept of binding, merging, and bringing together that I emphasize throughout my story comes directly from my yoga background. Desikachar states, "Many different interpretations of the word yoga have been handed down over the centuries. One of these is 'to come together.' 'to unite'" (5). While other interpretations persist, I was always drawn to the simple definition of unity. I did not recognize the obvious role yoga had formed within my thesis until I had completed two unusable drafts. Once I noticed the yogic

undertones, I rewrote the story to accentuate more concisely the coming together of forces. This is accomplished in physical and metaphorical ways. Physically, binding occurs through Samuel's invention of the spork: he literally brought together the fork and the spoon. Metaphorically, this is done through Moira and Samuel's collaboration and willingness to accept what the other lacks. In Moira's case, the mind, and Samuel's case, a body. Although the yogic principle included is drastically simplified, the lessons I learned from Desikachar during my early exposure to yoga greatly influenced this thesis.

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