

BOOK REVIEW / CRITIQUE DE LIVRE

An Invited Threat. Sanderson SK. Sanderson SK, illustrator; Muir S, editor; Van Camp R, copyeditor. Canada: Healthy Aboriginal Network; 2013. Softcover: 40 p. Price: CDN\$5.00. Available from: <http://www.thehealthyaboriginal.net/>.

Just a Story. Sanderson SK. Sanderson SK, illustrator; Muir S, editor. Canada: Healthy Aboriginal Network; 2012. Softcover: 48 p. Price: CDN\$5.00. Available from: <http://www.thehealthyaboriginal.net/>.

Kiss Me Deadly. Van Camp R. Auchter C, illustrator; Muir S, editor; Reimer V, copyeditor. Canada: Healthy Aboriginal Network; 2011. Softcover: 48 p. Price: CDN\$5.00. Available from: <http://www.thehealthyaboriginal.net/>.

Since the mid-2000s, the Healthy Aboriginal Network has been publishing comic books that address health and social issues in an aboriginal context.¹ Rather than present a single aboriginal reality, the authors, illustrators, and editors depict a multitude of individuals, experiences, attitudes, and beliefs, and they explore the intersections and tensions between them. The British Columbia based society describes its work as the “non-profit promotion of health, literacy and wellness” [1], a pursuit that is evident both in the comics that it publishes for Aboriginal youth and in its publishing practices: youth are invited to take part in focus groups that impact the final product, a practice that privileges their voices and creates opportunities for learning.²

Many of the issues addressed in the “Certified Aboriginal” comics are relevant both within and outside of Aboriginal communities. These include financial literacy, dog bites, residential school, maternal and child health, gangs, and fetal alcohol spectrum disorder [1]. The three comics selected for review—*Kiss Me Deadly*, *An Invited Threat*, and *Just a Story*—address sexual health, diabetes, and mental health. These comics draw from wisdom rooted in a variety of approaches to life and health, and they incorporate Aboriginal traditions and beliefs.

Kiss Me Deadly, written by Richard Van Camp and illustrated by Christopher Auchter, addresses sexual health across generations and sexual orientations. Acceptance of and love for individuals with diverse sexual preferences is supported by the traditional view of two-spirited individuals. The comic also addresses issues related to the medicine wheel, protection against and testing for sexually transmitted infections, pornography, sex, and love.

An Invited Threat, written and illustrated by Steven Keewatin Sanderson, shifts between fantasy and reality to highlight risk factors and outcomes associated with diabetes. The comic focuses on the impact that parents

and band store managers can have on the health of their partners, children, and community members.

Just a Story, also written and illustrated by Sanderson, addresses mental health issues. It follows two young siblings as they struggle to cope with their parents’ constant fighting and drinking, one by turning inwards and the other by directing his feelings outwards in bouts of violence and anger. The comic emphasizes the availability of support, focusing primarily on the roles of teachers and counsellors. The comic also highlights some of the ways that individuals can communicate with each other (by writing or drawing, for example) when it is too difficult to talk.

Ultimately, these comics point to opportunities for positive change and growth, as when a character in *Kiss Me Deadly* asserts that she does not see a space for sexual health in the medicine wheel, and shares her desire to begin a dialogue on the subject between youth and health professionals.

Sexual health, diabetes, and mental health are important issues to many readers, but of particular significance to young Aboriginals, their loved ones, caregivers, and educators. The Public Health Agency of Canada reports that “... Aboriginal peoples are over-represented in the HIV epidemic and are being infected with HIV at a younger age than other Canadians” [2]. They also report that “Type 2 diabetes is more frequent among Aboriginal children and youth than among their non-Aboriginal counterparts” [3]. Aboriginal populations are also disproportionately affected by mental health issues; Health Canada reports, for example, that “First Nations youth commit suicide about five to six times more often than non-Aboriginal youth” [4]. These comics have the potential to communicate important health information to an at-risk and diverse group of readers and learners: the straightforward, jargon-free narratives are easy to follow, and the thoughtful combination of illustrations, language, symbols, and lettering highlights key points.

One of the many strengths of the comics is their ability to educate without seeming overly didactic. Language and imagery are easy to understand and seem designed to lightheartedly introduce serious issues, which may minimize barriers of understanding and fear and demystify potentially frightening procedures and practices. *Just a Story*, for example, explores different approaches to mental health counselling and explains that the “labels” applied to individuals by health professionals are tools used to develop treatment plans, not to stigmatize. *Kiss Me Deadly* presents misconceptions about testing for sexually transmitted infections before countering them with accurate accounts of actual processes. Colloquial language

¹Many comics may be previewed at <http://www.thehealthyaboriginal.net/>.

²Videos related to focus group testing and the creation of the comics are available at the HealthyAboriginal YouTube channel at <http://www.youtube.com/user/HealthyAboriginal>.

and bold images lend to the clarity of the messages. For example, one character tells another that testing involves a nurse who “puts a finger up your bum”; this statement is accompanied by an image of the clothed speaker bent over. Both visually and through words, the comics capture experiences that may be shared by readers, contributing to the relatability of the narratives.

Healthcare and education professionals and institutions are generally depicted as playing positive roles in Aboriginal health. Further, aboriginal individuals are shown to be key players in healthcare, as when in *Kiss Me Deadly* a young aboriginal woman seeks information from an aboriginal nurse about becoming a nurse herself. Tensions are also explored. In *An Invited Threat*, a guest speaker from the Ministry of Health attends a band meeting to discuss “. . . the threat of diabetes, especially in rural communities . . ., where the diabetes rate is five times the national average.” She is met with resistance, but the conflict provides opportunities both within and outside of the comic for discussion of factors that may lead to diabetes and the consequences of unhealthy eating practices.

Significantly, most of the characters in these comics take responsibility for their own health and support the health of others, as well. *An Invited Threat* explores the many factors that contribute to unhealthy eating including the availability and affordability of healthy foods, the role of band stores as a “revenue source for the nation” and the pressure to make a profit, the hectic pace of life, the ubiquitous presence of junk food, and the targeting of children as consumers by companies that make junk food. There is no suggestion that the choice to commit to healthy eating is easy or without cost, but the potential price of not making that commitment—including diabetes and death—is made clear. Setting an example for readers, the protagonists make choices that support the good health of their family and community. In *Just a Story*, a girl learns about mental health support and how it can greatly improve quality of life. She shares this knowledge with her brother, leading to a better life for them both. This process of learning and sharing is presented in the comics as worthwhile and rewarding, and it may encourage similar behaviour in readers.

Although these comics incorporate and promote acceptance of different approaches to health, they are not without their shortcomings. For example, whereas *Kiss Me Deadly* addresses two-spiritedness, all of the reviewed comics feature predominantly heteronormative narratives. *Kiss Me Deadly* also seems to condemn some sexual practices. For example, several characters disparage certain sexual practices as “cheap.” Referring to pornography, one character asserts: “. . . those pictures. They turn love-making into something mean and ugly.” This sentiment is communicated visually through two images, one of a naked man and woman embracing and kissing and the other of a female dominatrix and a male in bondage gear. The latter image is positioned directly under the enlarged and bolded word “ugly.” Such messages risk shaming or alienating readers.

Also of concern are the nightmarish images featured in a vision in *An Invited Threat*. Such images are common to comics, but the segment may be more likely to produce fear than understanding. In the vision, a woman sees herself attacked by a monstrous figure whose forearm and hand have been replaced by a menacing saw. The monster has been sent to amputate her legs due to “complications from [her] diabetes.” In the vision, the woman escapes before the monster reaches her, while in reality, some diabetics—including, perhaps, family members of the young readers—will need to undergo amputation due to diabetes complications. Although commendable for presenting visions as valid sources of knowledge and illustrating the serious consequences of diabetes and the possible anxieties of diabetics, the comic could negatively affect readers who may see a loved one or themselves in need of such a procedure.

Overall, the strengths of the comics greatly outnumber the weaknesses. The comics are easy to understand, relatable, affordable, and respectful of different approaches to life and learning in both their format and content. They make important health information accessible to a broad range of readers and connect readers to additional support and resources via a list of appropriate websites on their back covers. Healthy Aboriginal Network comics merit a place in any library that serves Aboriginal youth, and young people from other cultural backgrounds or the families, caregivers, or educators of these youth who may have an interest in the topics covered.

References

1. Healthy Aboriginal Network. The Healthy Aboriginal Network [Internet]. [cited 13 Jan 2014]. Available from: <http://www.thehealthyaboriginal.net/>.
2. Fact sheet: Aboriginal peoples [Internet]. Canada: Public Health Agency of Canada; Modified 30 August 2012 [cited 13 Jan 2014]. Available from: <http://www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/aids-sida/pr/sec6-eng.php#ab>.
3. Diabetes in Canada: facts and figures from a public health perspective. *Chapter 6 – Diabetes among First Nations, Inuit, and Métis populations* [Internet]. Canada: Public Health Agency of Canada; Modified 15 December 2011 [cited 13 Jan 2014]. Available from: <http://www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/cd-mc/publications/diabetes-diabete/facts-figures-faits-chiffres-2011/chap6-eng.php#THE1>.
4. First Nations & Inuit health. Mental health and wellness [Internet]. Canada: Health Canada; Modified 4 February 2013 [cited 13 Jan 2014]. Available from: <http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/fniah-spnia/promotion/mental/index-eng.php>.

Jennifer Owens, MLIS

Saskatoon Health Region Medical Library
E-mail: jowens.librarian@gmail.com