

# Mediating Kinship

## *Relational Perspectives on Dementia in Two Norwegian Graphic Novels*

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*This article compares two contemporary Norwegian graphic novels that depict a son's experience with a parent's dementia: But Who Are You? (Men hvem er du? 2023) by Martin Erntsen and My Mother (Mora mi, 2023) by Trond Bredesen. The analysis focuses on kinship from a relational perspective. In the first part of the article, various relational challenges related to caregiver accounts of persons with dementia are outlined. The subsequent section presents an anthropologically informed view of kinship and relationality as intersubjective processes mediated through practices such as care and memory work. This perspective allows us to shift attention from the dialectic between the caregiver and the vulnerable person toward the relational processes they take part in, and from questions about narrative and narratability towards the aesthetic mediation of various relational practices. The analysis explores how care is linked to memory work in the two graphic novels, the ways in which this memory work is conveyed through the comic format, and how these practices mediate kinship—simultaneously producing, sustaining, questioning, and transforming the relationship between son and parent with dementia. In conclusion, the article revisits relational perspectives within dementia literature and examines the specificities of aesthetic mediations of kinship and community.*

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# Introduction

This article presents a comparative analysis of relational perspectives on dementia in two Norwegian graphic novels: *Men hvem er du?* (*But Who Are You?* 2023) by Martin Erntsen and *Mora mi* (*My Mother*, 2023) by Trond Bredesen.<sup>1</sup> Dementia is a prominent topic in contemporary Norwegian literature across various genres (Simönhjell 2018; Bjørkøy 2020). In Norway, the publication of these graphic novels in 2023 signifies the movement of filial memoirs that focus on dementia into the medium of comics.<sup>2</sup> Both *But Who Are You?* and *My Mother* share a common theme: they take a son's perspective on a parent (a mother and father respectively) who is ageing, experiencing a form of dementia, and residing in a nursing home. Both narratives explore their parent's institutionalization and loss of cognitive abilities, using self-representations (avatars) and first-person narration. However, their depictions of the parent-child relationship and the impact of dementia differ significantly. Additionally, the ways in which the comics medium is employed to convey interactions and practices related to that relationship and its challenges vary. How should we approach these distinct relational perspectives in two filial graphic memoirs about dementia; what characterizes their relationality; and what can these graphic novels tell us about the affordances of the comics form to aesthetically mediate how the changed health and cognitive abilities of a parent might influence a filial relationship?

Departing from these questions, the first part of the article outlines several relational challenges that have been discussed in scholarly work on narratives told from the perspective of next-of-kin or informal caregivers. I then suggest the term kinship, here understood as a processual form of relatedness mediated by practices such as interactions, care, nurture, and memory work, as an analytical optic. This approach implies a shift in focus from the dialectic between the carer and the vulnerable person towards the relational processes they take part in, and from questions about narrative and narratability towards the broader aesthetic mediation of various relational practices through the comics form. The following

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1. For the sake of readability, I will refer to the English translation of the titles in the following.

2. Prior to this, dementia had been depicted in Jason's (John Arne Sæterøy) graphic short story "In-venting" (Nothing) from the collection *Frida Kahlos papegøye* (Frida Kahlo's Parrot 2015), about an elderly woman with dementia, and Anders N. Kvammens commissioned work *Jeg husker ikke... Historier om demens* (I don't remember... Stories about dementia, 2020) which follows three families where a parent is diagnosed with early onset Alzheimer's disease. Erntsen and Bredesen's contributions differ from these previous works in that they openly build on personal experiences and, importantly in our context, take a filial perspective.

analysis focuses on how the two graphic novels approach the changes in familial memory that follow the onset of dementia, how care is linked to memory work, and how these practices mediate kinship through processes that simultaneously produce, uphold, query, and transform the parent–child relationship. The ways in which these processes are aesthetically mediated through the comics medium result in different relational perspectives on dementia: where Erntsen draws vast inner landscapes of shared associations, memories, and fantasies that point towards a process of commemoration, Bredesen’s use of synecdochical tropes serves to establish what I will call a familial gaze. I conclude the article with a discussion of how an analytical approach focused on kinship might suggest new perspectives on the relational challenges inherent in dementia literature and what characterizes aesthetic mediations of relatedness.

## Relational challenges of dementia literature

Dementia literature is dominated by relational perspectives in the sense that the narratives are often told by someone other than the person who has dementia, usually a relative or a close one (Bitenc 2020, 128; Sako & Falcus 2019, 88; DeFalco 2010). The structural development of dementia makes this hard to avoid: dementia comes with a loss of communicative skills and increasing cognitive deficits, making it difficult for many persons with dementia to tell and publish their own stories (Simonhjell 2018, 135).<sup>3</sup> As a result, narratives about dementia often take an outside perspective on the condition, and this comes with several challenges insofar as we are studying how (the person with) dementia is being represented. Studies show that characters with dementia often become increasingly ‘othered’ by their cognitive deficits throughout the narratives in ways that have been described as uncanny (DeFalco 2010) and gothic (Goldman 2017). As dementia literature is dominated by forms of life writing, an umbrella term for many varieties of personal

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3. Notable exceptions exist. Internationally, there are several examples of dementia literature written by persons with dementia as well as fictional works where the narrator has a form of dementia (see Bitenc 2020; Sako & Falcus 2019). In Norwegian literature, several fictional works take the perspective of persons with dementia, while autobiographical works are rare (Simonhjell 2018, 139–140). See, however, Lothertington and Obstfelder (2023) for an analysis of the published diary of Thomas Christian Wyller.

narratives including (auto)biography and memoir<sup>4</sup>, the outside perspective often also comes with ethical challenges connected to whether the person with dementia has consented, or is even able to consent, to their exposure. The risk of misrepresentation includes, but is not limited to, the many intimate moments connected with “confusion, hallucination, or loss of control over bodily functions” that might be depicted in relational autobiographies, and that can violate the privacy of the person with dementia (Couser 2004, x cited in Bitenc 2020, 129). These misrepresentations may be harmful not only to the person depicted but also to the larger group they belong to by reinforcing stigma or disseminate stereotypes.

Both *But Who Are You?* and *My Mother* are filial memoirs about dementia that openly build on auto/biographical experiences.<sup>5</sup> *But Who Are You?* explores a conflicted relationship between Martin and his father, Leif. Martin travels to visit Leif, who has Alzheimer’s and is admitted to a nursing home. The visit sparks an inner journey through memories from childhood, youth, and adulthood which are narrated retrospectively, as Martin tries to understand and reconcile with his father considering both the past and the present. Emotions, memories, and inner life are expressed in a cartoonish and expressive style fraught with visual metaphors, often depicting Martin and Leif walking together through surreal associative landscapes. In contrast, Bredesen’s *My Mother* is focused on how Trond sees his mother, Johanne, during her final two years in an assisted living facility. Bredesen presents a mix of portraits, single-panel comics, and comic strips detailing Johanne’s everyday life, the exasperating and often humorous conversations arising from her memory loss and confusion, and the significance of certain objects – such as a pair of winter boots or an embroidered pillow. Trond himself appears only as a minor character and witness, and the past is seldom mentioned. Bredesen’s artistic style varies from sketch-like to detailed, realistic drawings, sometimes within a single panel, where inner life is presented

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4. Various generic terms have been coined to point towards the specificities of life writing concerned with health related vulnerability, such as illness narratives (Frank 1995); pathography, defined as “a form of autobiography or biography that describes personal experiences of illness” (Hawkins 1999, 1); somatography, which recounts the experience of “living with, loving, or knowing intimately someone” with an “odd or anomalous body” (Couser 2009, 2); and curography, a recently coined generic term for narratives that take the perspective of a caregiver (Nesby 2023, 223). When it comes to life writing that takes a relational perspective, terms such as relational autobiography (Couser 2012, Smith and Watson 2001) and care writing (Bitenc 2020) have been proposed.

5. While I consider both works to be auto/biographically founded, there is no 1:1-relationship between the author and the main character and narrator. In my analysis I uphold this distinction by using last names (Erntsen, Bredesen) to signify the authors and first names (Martin, Trond) to signify the character-narrators.

metonymically or through dialogue rather than visual metaphors. Together, *But Who Are You?* and *My Mother* outline different narrative, formal, and thematic approaches to how the parent–child relationship is affected by dementia.



Figure 1. Front page, Erntsen 2023. © Gyldendal. Front page, Bredeesen 2023. © No Comprendo Press.

Considering the relational challenges outlined above, both works appear to be examples of uncollaborative life writing and thus highlight issues related to the ethics of exposure. Erntsen makes a point of the uncollaborative status of *But Who Are You?* in several metafictional panels, where we see Martin drawing his father by the bedside. When Leif asks what he is doing, Martin repeatedly lies and says that he is working on a children's book (fig. 2). Martin's unwillingness to tell his father that he is drawing him can have several reasons: Leif's often explosive anger being one, his confused state due to Alzheimer's disease being another, and Martin might not yet have had a book project in mind at this time. Yet the several instances where Martin claims that his father has always supported his work as a comics artist (Erntsen 2023, 42-43; 88-89) serve to make the ethical status of the work a central part of its metafictional aspects. As with other ambiguities in the relationship between father and son, Erntsen does not explicitly address or resolve this ambivalence. Instead, the uncollaborative status of the graphic novel can be seen as part of its thematization of a conflicted and ambivalent filial relationship.



Figure 2. Erntsen 2023, 72. "Are you drawing on that?" "Yes" / "I'm illustrating a children's book" / "Right now I'm colouring in" "Oh, OK". My translations. © Gyldendal

Bredesen, in *My Mother*, does not explicitly address the graphic novel's status as life writing other than in a short epilogue, where he asserts that other family members helped care for his mother towards the end. Yet his sketch-like drawing style gives an impression of immediacy and presence that underscores its status as an (auto)biographically founded narrative. Short narrative sections are interspersed with splash pages and spreads that seem to catch everyday moments as they happen, with broad pencil strokes showing only the outlines of persons and objects. Other panels show detailed portraits of Johanne sleeping or awake in bed, seemingly drawn at the bedside (fig. 3). Differences in style and materials – a lined background suggesting a notebook, or the yellowish and structured grain of a sketch pad – enhance the impression that the person drawing is present in the situation as it is being drawn, giving the implicit reader a complicit or voyeuristic role. This, too, serves to foreground ethical questions connected to the relationship between the graphic narrator and the person who is, perhaps unwittingly, being portrayed.



Figure 3. *Splash page, up*. 2023. © No Comprendo Press.

Ethical concerns about exposure relate to the relationship between the narrator and the narratee, which, in this context, extend beyond the roles of son and parent to include that of a carer and a person in need of care. Both *But Who Are You?* and *My Mother* can be seen as examples of *care writing* (Bitenc 2020). I use the term ‘care’ broadly, encompassing both the emotional aspect of feeling care and the practical aspect of providing care in response to another’s needs. In *Imagining Care. Responsibility, Dependency, and Canadian Literature* (2016), literary scholar Amelia DeFalco encapsulates the multifaceted nature of care: “We give care, take care, care for, care about, have cares, and don’t care” (2016a, 5). The role of carer is intricately tied to shifts in our understanding of kinship when someone close to us experiences illness, an accident, or other significant physical or psychological changes.<sup>6</sup> This

6. In recent years, there has been an increased scholarly focus on the role of care and kinship within the broad, interdisciplinary field of *Health Humanities*. Literary scholar David Morris’ *Eros and Illness* (2017), anthropologist Arthur Kleinman’s *The Soul of Care* (2019), and sociologist Arthur Frank’s “vulnerable reading” of *King Lear* (2022), have in common that personal experiences with caregiving become a vantage point for reflections on the intersections of medicine, health, ethics, and art. The same period sees an increase in book-length studies at the intersection of literary studies and care ethics philosophy, including Amelia DeFalco’s *Imagining Care* (2016) and *Curious Kin in Fictions of Posthuman Care* (2023), Jeffrey Berman’s *The Art of Caregiving in Fiction, Film, and Memoir* (2020), and Maurice Hamington and Ce Rosenow’s *Care Ethics and Poetry* (2019).

altered affinity, sympathy, or closeness often entails a responsibility to provide what DeFalco terms “para-ordinary care” – care that is not extraordinary but exists “adjacent to the ordinary”, not “taken for granted or habitually represented within popular culture” (2016a, 7). While the experience of caring for a parent with dementia is not uncommon, it often constitutes a form of para-ordinary care.

Para-ordinary care comes with relational challenges of its own. When someone is vulnerable or in need, often precipitated by illness or impairment, it “creates an imbalance of ability or means between the two parties involved” (DeFalco 2016a, 5). This imbalance is what produces care, whether felt or practiced, but it also poses one of the fundamental challenges of stories told by the carer: that they too are necessarily asymmetrical. DeFalco points out that “[o]ften, and perhaps inevitably, the vulnerable subject’s story becomes occluded by the caregiver’s, whose socially unrecognized, typically unsupported labour begins to dominate the narrative” (2016a, 35). This danger of occluding or silencing the experiences of the person with dementia is present on all levels of the narrative: that of narration (by whom and how the story is told), emplotment (what elements or events are included and given weight in the story), and narratability (what is deemed capable or worthy of narration). Within dementia literature, the domination of the carer’s perspective gives these challenges cultural and political implications. Literary scholars Katsura Sako and Sarah Falcus suggest in *Contemporary Narratives of Dementia: Ethics, Ageing, Politics* that “given the sheer volume of carer accounts of dementia” there is “a danger that these accounts shape our perception of the experience of dementia in ways that make our intimate engagement with and empathy for the person with dementia more difficult” (2019, 86). Instead, we are invited to engage with the often overwhelming demands that para-ordinary care places on their close ones, in ways that might inform our views on the need for informal as well as professional care services.

Literary scholar Linda Hamrin Nesby has a different view on the asymmetries of care writing, however, in which it is the caregiver’s story that is in danger of becoming overshadowed by that of the vulnerable person (2023, 236; 225). Nesby’s premise is that (auto)biographical accounts told by carers need to navigate between the story of the caregiver, for which she suggests the term *curography*, and that of the care-receiver, the (often untold and unwritten) *pathography* (2023, 221; 227). Building on Algirda Greimas’ actant model, Nesby argues that carers hold the role of helper in a traditional pathography and will have to break free from this

story's influence to become the subject of their own narrative (2023, 225; 226-229).<sup>7</sup> This constitutes, to Nesby, the fundamental "literary dilemma" of care writing: how to write freely and autonomously from the shadow of a brutal or harsh story linked to another person's vulnerability, as subject rather than helper? This, too, is an important aspect of carer accounts where authors frequently feel that they are betraying a loved one (Miller 1996 quoted in Bitenc 2020, 130) or experience their writing as transgressive (Bitenc 2020, 130), indicating the continued presence and influence of the vulnerable person's story over the carer's narrative.

These different perspectives on the fundamental asymmetries of care writing are interesting because they invite us to look to narratology and literary form to query our expectations regarding the relationship between carer and care-receiver. Issues related to narrative subjectivity, agency, and autonomy become particularly important in situations where a vulnerable person's story remains untold and unwritten, perhaps even untellable, as is often the case with dementia. In fact, DeFalco came to her studies of care and caregiving in literature from a project about narratives on old age, *Uncanny Subjects: Aging in Contemporary Narrative* (2010), in which she wrote a chapter on dementia literature. It was the dementia narratives that made her aware of the complexities of the relationship between caregiver and care-receiver and became the starting point of her studies on the ethical questions raised by literary representations of care and caregiving (2016a, 6). Dementia, then, seems to foreground the challenges inherent in narratives that take a relational perspective on another's vulnerability in particular ways.

A part of this particularity, I will argue, lies in how the condition affects cognitive abilities, including memory, in ways often perceived to destabilize and change familiar and generational identity as well as the person with dementia's own personhood. As literary scholar Åsta Marie Bjorvand Bjørkøy writes towards the conclusion of her chapter "Å leve med demens" (Living with Dementia):

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7. Linda Hamrin Nesby builds her argument on Harold Bloom's studies of influence in poetry (1973, 1975) as developed on by Paul de Man (1983) and Gilbert and Gubar's (1979) study of patriarchal influences on female authors in the 19th century. She suggests that the narrative of the curography draws on the same rhetorical tropes to navigate, and attempt to break free from, the influence of the underlying pathography (Nesby 2023, 226-229).

*A person without memory is still a person with feelings. But a person without memory will hardly be able to be an equal part of their relationship with others, which will affect the nature of the relationship and, of course, have serious and difficult consequences for the relationships the individual is part of. (2020, 149, my translation)<sup>8</sup>*

The relational challenge outlined here pertains to the role memory plays in relationships rather than dementia's effect on narrative agency, the ability to verbalize one's own story, or consent to being exposed in that of another. While Bjørkøy also points towards an asymmetry caused by the changed memory of one party, the citation suggests that it is the relationship itself that becomes affected in negative ways, suspending the question of whose story dominates, overshadows, or influences that of the other. Bjørkøy's reflections on dementia highlights the intersubjective functions of memory, emphasizing its relational rather than individual nature, and how it plays out *between* the two parties in the relationship. While this perspective does not eliminate the inherent asymmetries of (the narrative about) the relationship, it encourages us to consider the ways in which relationality is mediated between the two. In this case: through memory.

Several scholars have suggested that this intersubjectivity might be more readily visible in the comics medium than in written narratives. In *Graphic Somatography: Life Writing and the Ethics of Care* (2016b), DeFalco argues this point by highlighting the formal specificities of perspective and narration in graphic narratives:

*Unlike care narratives told exclusively with words, which are typically characterized by a singular perspective and narrative resolution, comics are by their very nature polyvocal, multi-perspectival, punctuated by absences and gaps, by negative space both within panels and between them. (237)*

The plurality imbedded in the visuality of the comics form puts "embodiment and concomitant dependency front and centre" according to DeFalco (2016b, 226). It allows us to see different bodies simultaneously and continuously throughout the narrative. In their study of dementia literature, Sako and Falcus build on these aspects of DeFalco's work, suggesting that graphic novels might "evoke in their readers a form of responsible reading that enables them to empathise, even if fleetingly, with both carers and those with dementia" (2019, 115). However, they also acknowledge that the comics form highlights challenges related to ethics of exposure, as it often represents vulnerable and even abject bodies (115) – as we

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8. "Et menneske uten hukommelse er fortsatt et menneske med følelser. Men et menneske uten hukommelse vil vanskelig kunne være en likeverdig del av relasjonen til sine medmennesker, noe som vil påvirke relasjonens karakter og selvfølgelig få alvorlige og vanskelige følger for de relasjoner vedkommende er del av."

have already seen in the extracts from *But Who Are You?* and *My Mother*. Similarly, literary scholar Thomas G. Couser warns that the visual embodiment of graphic novels might lead to an increased focus on an individual's personal physical impairment rather than their socially constructed disability (2018, 350). The visibility of intersubjective relations in graphic novels must not lead us to overlook the systemic structures that inform the roles of carer and care-receiver.

Of course, one could also argue that written narratives have their own affordances that might enable polyvocal or multi-perspectival representation, and that the multi-perspectives of graphic novels remain limited. The comics medium invites a placement of characters side by side on the page, but the view we are invited to take on them can still be asymmetrical and – particularly in the case of life writing – favour the gaze of the graphic narrator and their avatar.<sup>9</sup> It seems safe to suggest, however, that the formal affordances of comics foreground not only the narrative challenges of relationality in carer accounts, but also the role played by visual embodiment and questions related to focalization: who do we see on the page, how are they depicted visually, and through whose eyes do we see them? While we should vary of overlooking systemic structures informing these asymmetrical roles, we should also vary of addressing the relational challenges of dementia literature in ways that turn a dialectical relationship into an oppositional one, or that lock the narrator and narratee into specific roles. The relationship of care receiver–caregiver or subject–helper carries different and perhaps even contrasting implications compared to that of parent–child. The asymmetries of these relationships also differ from the authority of parent over child to that of the carer over the person in need. A filial relationship might involve all these roles, often interchangeably and reluctantly. Taking my cue from Bjørkøy's focus on the relationship itself, I will use the term *kinship* as an analytical optic for my own exploration into the relational perspectives taken in *But Who Are You?* and *My Mother*.

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9. The comics medium necessitates the distinction between verbal narration (text boxes and dialogue), monstration (what is shown on the page) and graphiation (the style in which it is drawn) (Groensteen 2011, 92-93). Here, I use graphic narrator to point to the global narrator “responsible for the whole narrative organisation, including the production of both the words and the drawings, as well as the showing of each image and scene” (Mikkonen 2017, 131).

## A kinship perspective on the relationality of care writing

What is implied by a kinship perspective? In this context, kinship determines an “essentially processual” relatedness (Carsten 2000, 16) – a felt and practised social bond that often, but not always, involves genealogy. Anthropologist Maximilian Holland (2012) posits that social bonds and kinship stem from a shared social environment and processes of frequent interaction, care, and nurture rather than solely from genealogical relationships. In approaching the graphic novels through this understanding of kinship, I seek to follow up on Rebecca Bitenc’s claim, in *Reconsidering Dementia Narratives: Empathy, Identity and Care* (2020), that we need to attend more closely to the relational aspects of identity in dementia through cross-medial and interdisciplinary analysis. The changed health and cognitive abilities of a person with dementia will necessarily lead to changes in the various practices and interactions that inform the kinship relations they take part in. These changes are a premise for the relational perspectives taken in *But Who Are You?* and *My Mother*. Viewing these graphic novels through the lens of kinship opens up for an analysis that considers the relational challenges inherent in this premise as part of a broader aesthetic mediation of the practices and processes involved in creating and upholding kinship relations.

Care plays a central role in kinship, and Holland states that the “performance of care (...) is considered the overriding factor in mediating social bonds” (Holland 2012, 282). Care is here understood as a performative practice rather than just a sentiment – an understanding that aligns with ethics of care philosophy (Tronto 1993, Hamington & Rosenow 2019). As we saw above, care also figures prominently in scholarly discussions about the relational challenges of life writing, where the relational perspective is often understood specifically as the *carer’s* perspective. However, while care is an important theme in both *But Who Are You?* and *My Mother*, neither Trond nor Martin perform unsupported care labour to the extent that it comes to dominate the narrative in the manner described by DeFalco. This necessitates a clarification of the ways in which care and the role of the caregiver feature in these graphic novels. What kind of care do Trond and Martin perform – and in what ways does it mediate the social bonds between themselves and their parent?

The narrative present of both works is anchored in the care facilities where Leif and Johanne live, making them institutional narratives. Both graphic novels focus on filial relationships and other (informal or formal) caregivers figure only as supporting characters. Even so, Erntsen and Bredesen both depict the formal and

informal care provided to their parent as complex choreographies involving several participants: nurses, doctors, family members, visitors, and, in Bredesen's case, even a dentist, a hairdresser, and neighbouring patients. This *careography* (Navne & Svendsen 2017, 254; Nesby 2023, 223) seems to be based on what Eva Feder Kittay (1999) terms nested obligations, where responsibilities and chores are shared, and those who care for others are entitled to societal support. The caregiving depicted here differs significantly from the one studied in DeFalco's *Graphic Somatography: Life Writing and the Ethics of Care* (2016b), which explores graphic narratives of illness and informal care work in situations where the health care system largely fails to alleviate these burdens.

Erntsen and Bredesen portray care within the framework of a welfare state where – although far from providing perfect care – the responsibility of para-ordinary care is shared by others than the graphic narrators. Trond, in *My Mother*, does perform several care activities and chores. When his avatar figures in the graphic novel, it is often in the role of helper or doer. He helps his mother use the toilet, he cleans her apartment, and he serves as host for her birthday party. It remains clear, however, that he is only one part of the larger careography surrounding his mother. Martin, on the other hand, is primarily portrayed as a guest in *But Who Are You?* He lives far away and has come for a short stay because his father “almost begged” him to come visit (Erntsen 2023, 18, my translation). Martin helps Leif in and out of chairs, brings him coffee, and holds the cup for him – but he is also served dinner by the nurses, and it is they who interfere when Leif is angered, needs the toilet, or is bothered by his catheter. This makes *But Who Are You?* and *My Mother* examples of dementia literature written from what health humanities scholar Martina Zimmerman calls a “care-free distance”, a perspective that, in the US at least, is largely gendered and mostly figures in memoirs written by sons rather than daughters (2017, 49). In these narratives, the focus on care shifts from the burdens of unpaid, unsupported, or unappreciated care labour towards the carer's ability to “see lifetime continuity” and “encourage identity-affirming care” (Zimmerman 2017, 51). These forms of care seem to have more to do with memory work than with activities of labour.

Bitenc notes that filial caregiver's memoirs “are frequently born out of an impulse to memorialise the parent” (2020, 128). In my view, this memory work concerns not only lifetime continuity and identity-affirmation connected to the person with dementia, but also the processes of relatedness that inform the filial relationship as one of kinship. Within the field of cultural memory studies, Astri Erll argues that family memory is a specific type of collective memory. She builds her view on family memory on philosopher Maurice Halbwachs concept of *mémoire*

*collective*, developed in the 1920s, in which family memory is given a special status. The family can be seen as a mnemonic community in the sense that it builds on practices, contents, characteristics, and functions that aid memory (Erl1 2011, 308). Interestingly, Halbwachs states that family “has its own peculiar memory”, and that “[f]oremost in this memory are relations of kinship” (Erl1 2011, 306 citing Halbwachs 1992, 63). At the intersection of this view on the significance of kinship in family memory and Holland’s claim that care is the overriding factor in mediating social bonds, the different relational aspects of narrating about persons with dementia from a next-of-kin perspective so far seem to merge. When dementia causes changes in a family member’s memory, this will affect the family as a mnemonic community and the practices that mediate kinship within it. By taking a kinship perspective on *But Who Are You?* and *My Mother*, we can take an integrated view on the ways in which care, memory, and relationality is thematized and given aesthetic form in the graphic novels.

## *But Who Are You?* Travelling through commemorative landscapes

It has been argued that the comics medium may be particularly apt for the representation of memory. As literary scholar Hilary Chute suggests in *Graphic Women: Life Narrative and Contemporary Comics* (2010), the movement, or act, of memory shares formal similarities with the comics medium:

*The spatial form of comics is adept at engaging the subject of memory and reproducing the effects of memory – gaps, fragment, positions, layers, circularities; it recognizes and plays on the notion of memory as located in mind and body and as, perhaps, shiftingly inaccessible and accessible.* (134, author’s emphasis)

These formal affordances imply, according to Chute, that the very “art of crafting words and pictures together into a narrative punctuated by pause or absence, as in comics, also mimics the procedure of memory”, giving the representations of memory work in comics a performative aspect (2010, 4). Yet any aesthetic representation of memory will necessarily differ from private acts of remembering. In *Autobiographical Comics: Life Writing in Pictures* (2012), literary scholar Elisabeth El Refaie notes that the mediation of memories into the comics form involves “a deliberate and self-conscious act of communication” (100). As a result of this, the memories will be reshaped and transformed into stories, and then actively re-created, interpreted, and sometimes challenged and contested by readers. El

Refaie suggests the term *commemoration* to describe this collaborative aspect of how memories are mediated and remediated in comics. As dementia literature is often already framed as a memorialising act, graphic novels on this theme will often foreground these collaborative aspects of memory and how they are transformed or challenged by the changes in memory associated with dementia.

*But Who Are You?* unfolds a commemorative memory work in this sense which takes place during Martin's last visit to his father, Leif. The visit takes place shortly after Leif is diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease and admitted to a care facility. "But who are you?", the title's question, points towards the father's memory loss and his resulting confusion as to who those surrounding him are. On the book cover, Leif's portrait is displayed with his eyes hidden behind glasses and the title question filling the headspace of a second outline of his torso, this one made by unravelling bands of colour that can be read as a visual metaphor for Leif's dementia. But Martin also directs the same question at his father throughout the graphic novel, in a manner that reaches beyond the cognitive changes induced by Alzheimer's. Through his many reflections on his own memories – their conflicts, but also moments of support and love – reaching back to early childhood, Martin interrogates his father's identity as well as his own: who were you, who are you now, and who was and am I to you?



Figure 4. Cover, Erntsen 2023. © Gyldendal

The visual representation in *But Who Are You?* is centred around Martin's attempts at understanding, imagining, and eventually mediating through the comics form how Alzheimer's affects his father's cognition as well as Martin's own perceptions and memories of him. An underlying question is whether and how this affects their past and present relationship which has been a difficult one. Throughout the narrative, depictions of the present lead into episodic representations of past events shown as Martin remembers or imagines them, and where the characterisations often merge into visual metaphors representing thoughts, associations, and empathic visions of both Martin and his father's feelings and states of mind. This is particularly prominent in the prologue and epilogue which frame the narrative and serve as an extended metaphor for Martin's inner journey. These sections show father and son walking through a surreal and associative landscape until, in the epilogue, Martin leaves his father behind, walks into a blank space, and breathes out in what can be interpreted as a sigh of relief.

Father and son continuously change location and age as they move through this surreal landscape in the prologue. The objects that make up landmarks are, as the reader understands later, linked to Martin's memories of his father and what he has always thought characterises him: his work with sound systems, an interest in technology and computers, his childhood by the sea in the north of Norway, and his military service in the navy. By setting these memories side by side in the same landscape, Erntsen shows how we "tend to make connections between experiences that were originally separate in time and space, and that initially were not perceived to be causally linked" (El Refaie 2012, 100). The landscape also includes references and associations that are not connected to life events, such as the tower (fig. 5) from Torbjørn Egner's classic children's book *Kardemomme By* (*When the Robbers Came to Cardamom Town*, 1955). When Leif states that "They are here now, the bandits!", Martin is shown pondering on this word, "Bandits?", underneath an illustration where Egner's three robbers have merged with Carl Bark's Beagle Boys from the Donald Duck comics. These are references that can point to the childhood of both Leif and Martin, and one of several instances where Erntsen shows us that the imaginative and social patterns established in early childhood still influence and anchor the filial relationship.



Figure 5. *Unpaginated prologue*, Erntsen 2023. © Gyldendal

While *But Who Are You?* presents the reader with key events in Leif's previous life, spanning from his military service and career to his divorce from Martin's mother and the relationship to his present partner, Reidun, Erntsen continuously challenges Martin's position as Leif's biographer. This is done through visual representations of the imaginative and associative workings of Martin's own mind—in terms of imagination, memory, and reflection – as well as how he pictures those of his father. Several splash pages and spreads show landscapes like those from the prologue and epilogue, depicting father and son in increasingly psychedelic landscapes, fraught with intervisual references to popular culture, artworks, and technological devices from the 1980s and 1990s, in which any narrative orientation becomes difficult.



Figure 6. Erntsen 2023, 128-129. "I want to go back to my room." / "Dad, I shall have to leave now..." My translations. © Gyldendal

Rather than understanding these visual representations of the workings of the demented mind as an ethically fraught attempt at fictionalising the experience of the person with dementia from the inside, I understand them to be representations of a processual memory work that involves both parties. Erntsen gives visual form to the ways in which Martin is affected by his father's changes in memory and cognitive ability, the attempts at recognition and empathy that they lead to, but also the ways in which they trigger Martin's own memories or associations and connections. In the prologue, particularly, Erntsen portrays this memory work as something that can never be entirely individual. The associative world he draws up for us comes into existence through interactions and dialogue with his father and the ways his dementia demands a continuous navigation between the present and the memories, associations, and fantasies of both. The imaginative world that this results in is one where affect and imagination dominate over temporal linearity and causality.

Leif's frequent outbursts of anger figure prominently in Martin's childhood memories, to the extent that Martin questions the trustworthiness of these memories and wonders if his perception of their past relationship is due to how

“bad memories stick better than good ones” (2023, 38-39, my translation, see also fig. 7). Scenes from the present seem to corroborate the authenticity of these memories, however. When Leif explodes in anger during Martin’s visit at the care facility, Martin is pictured as freezing up or turning into a childlike figure, indicating that Leif’s temperament relates to deep-seated patterns in their interaction and results in embodied reactions (fig. 8). The frequent visual metaphors used in these scenes, including characterisations of Leif through cartoonish figures and the use of colour to signal emotions, serve to connect past and present as well as concrete events and affective responses to each other. The result is a felt immediacy, where both Martin and the reader continually reassess the social and emotional bonds between them.



Figure 7. Erntsen 2023, 38 “I read once about how untrustworthy memories are. / That they change a little bit each time they’re recalled.” My translation. © Gyldendal



Figure 8. Erntsen 2023, 92. "There are bandits here! Don't you believe me??", "Yeah yeah ...". My translations. © Gyldendal

Erntsen privileges an affective and associative imagination over the retention of memory or establishment of documentary fact, and this might exemplify a memory work that is concerned with the processual production and reproduction of both memory and subjectivity. The commemorative work this results in is perhaps more aptly described as a form of hyper memory than as the "loss" or absence of mind, memory, and cognitive ability that dementia is often perceived to entail. While Erntsen's drawings never can depict a truly *"shared associative landscape"* (Erntsen 2023, paratext, my translation and italics), they do show the affinity between father and son as a continuing process, influenced by both, in which bonds of kinship are maintained even as they are being revisited and transformed. That is not to say, however, that the two parties are equal in this process or that it is a simple one. Erntsen's commemoration in the comics form uses extended visual metaphors to show us the complex, underlying mental processes that turns even a seemingly simple situation – drinking a cup of coffee and chatting with his father – into a tiring memory work in which both their present and past relationship is continuously being reiterated and interrogated. After reading the graphic novel to the end, readers might want to breathe a sigh of relief themselves, as Martin, on a final and blank page, leaves behind his father for what appears to be the last time.

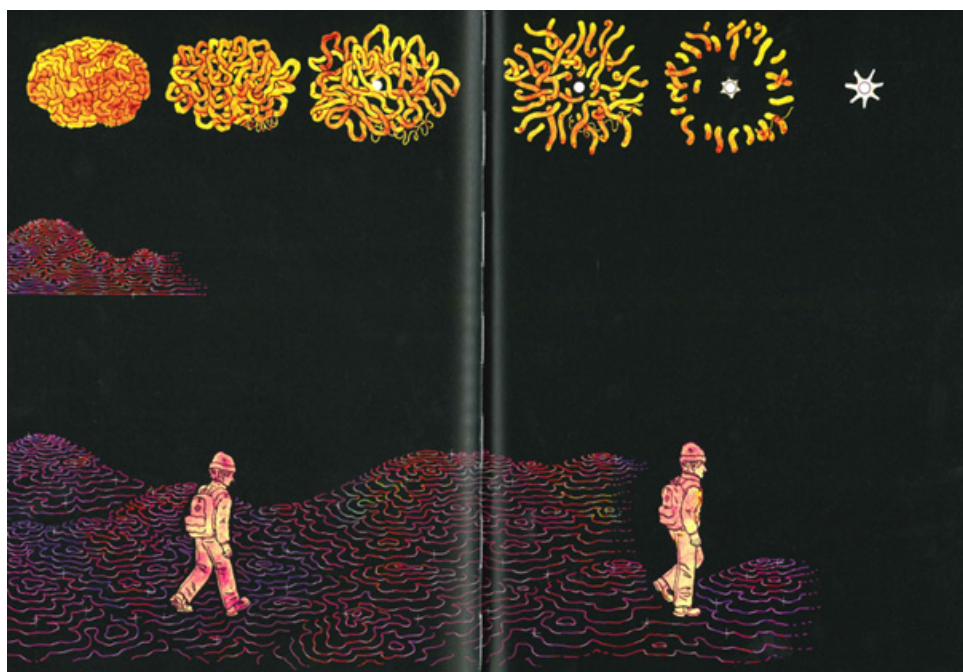


Figure 9. Erntsen 2023, 136–139. The two final spreads. © Gyl dendal

## *My Mother.* Seeing through a familiar gaze

Turning to Bredesen's *My Mother*, we are presented with a filial memoir that is perhaps more readily labelled a portrait than a narrative even though we follow a chronologically ordered and episodic narrative structure covering Johanne's two final years. Rather than the retrospective narration found in Erntsen's work, Bredesen gives the impression of glimpses into everyday situations through a series of sketch-like drawings. Most of the scenes stem from Trond's visits to his mother, Johanne, in the assisted living facility called Filten, interspersed with portraits and sketches of her in different quotidian situations. Bredesen makes extended use of the figure of metonymy in his representation of Johanne, in the sense that it is mainly the detailed depictions of objects – clothes, belongings, and medical equipment – that provide insight into her personality traits and her past and present life. The ambivalences that are thematised here do not stem from past conflicts or difficult personality traits (as they did in *But Who Are You?*) but arise instead from the needs of the present situation. Implicitly, Bredesen asks whether Trond could and should have done more for his mother in her final years, and what it means to navigate between the remains of a past self and the establishment of a new presence. Trond does not explicitly ask who his mother was before this, nor who she is in the present of the episodic narratives we are presented with. He seems instead to establish and anchor her identity in the bond of kinship stated in the very title: *My mother*, that is who.

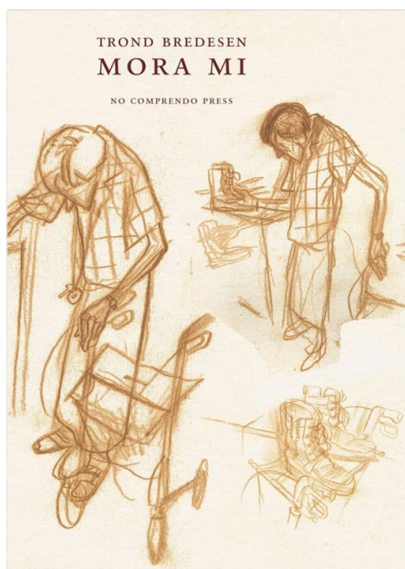


Figure 10. Bredesen 2023. Front page. © No Comprendo Press.

The process of establishing and preserving a kinship relation, and the mnemonic practices that are part of it, is given a more subtle form in this work than in *But Who Are You?* Kinship is linked, primarily, to the establishment of the familial gaze indicated by the title. To do this, Bredesen makes use of a device that we also find in Erntsen's graphic novel as well as in Anders N. Kvammen's *I don't remember... Stories about dementia (Jeg husker ikke... historier om demens, 2020)*, which is to outline the person with dementia in a contrast colour in several of the frames. In Erntsen's *But Who Are You?* coloration marks Leif as the main character and highlights his emotions, particularly by colouring him red when he is angry, irritated, or anxious. In Bredesen's *My Mother*, red is used consistently but without taking the form of symbolic representation of inner life. Johanne wears a red jacket, or her figure is outlined in red, and she is often drawn with more detail than those surrounding her, which places her at the centre of attention. The use of this bright colour seems to point to her character in a metonymical rather than metaphorical sense. Where metaphor creates an implied connection between two concepts that are unlike, such as the emotion anger and the colour red, metonymy refers to a concept through something closely related to it. In *My Mother*, Johanne's clothes and clothing are shown with lively colours throughout the graphic novel, and several panels show her commenting on her clothes and appearance. Metonymically, the characteristics of her clothing – colourful, elegant, joyful – come to characterise the person who wore and still wears them: Johanne. The use of colour in the novel hints at a set of personality traits, and gently insists on them still being present.

Bredesen's representation implies an identity-affirming view on Johanne, even as the past is seldom mentioned explicitly. The memoir is framed by a drawn portrait of a young Johanne on the first page (fig. 11), and a photograph of her with her two sons as children on the last one. Other than these photographs, and those that figure on the walls of her apartment, her past receives no visual representation and is only hinted at in the dialogue. Instead, Johanne's past life and characterisations connected with it are represented through the objects surrounding her. The fact of Johanne's vulnerability and physical and cognitive frailty imbues these objects with significance: an embroidered pillow, made by herself, and a rather new pair of winter boots become fraught with meaning. Here, too, Bredesen makes use of metonymy, in the form of synecdochical *pars pro toto*, where a part of something refers to the whole. Like her clothes, these objects come to represent the remaining parts of a past totality. They allude to who Johanne was and help the reader construct a picture of her former and present identity.



Figure 11. Bredesen 2023, unpaginated. © No Comprendo Press.

Johanne's own mnemonic practices also seem to be based on synecdoche. When she sees her embroidery in her apartment at the care facility, Johanne states that she made those, "So I suppose I'm in my home, then" (Bredesen 2023, my translation). She takes to walking around with her embroidered pillow or the winter boots in the basket of her walking chair, where they seem to instigate processes of social bonding in ways that affirm her identity – even to the point of giving her life meaning (fig. 12). In this manner, Johanne's belongings become part of an ongoing identity work still being performed, in which they by association or contiguity refer to larger concepts: I recognize that pillow as one I made, so I must live here; I am praised for the pillow, so I should live on. On another level, more closely connected to Trond and the process he is going through, the material reality of the objects also points towards an absence that is closing in, but to come. Johanne's things are being moved into the apartment at the assisted living facility when the narrative begins, and at the end of the book we see the furnished apartment without Johanne in it. The objects are, eventually, all that remain when Johanne has gone, and it will soon be Trond's own memories that imbue them with meaning.



Figure 12. Bredesen 2023, unpaginated. Spread: "I really just want to let go, Trond. But when I see that pillow I embroidered, I do want to go on for a bit longer. I get such praise for it." My translations. © No Comprendo Press.

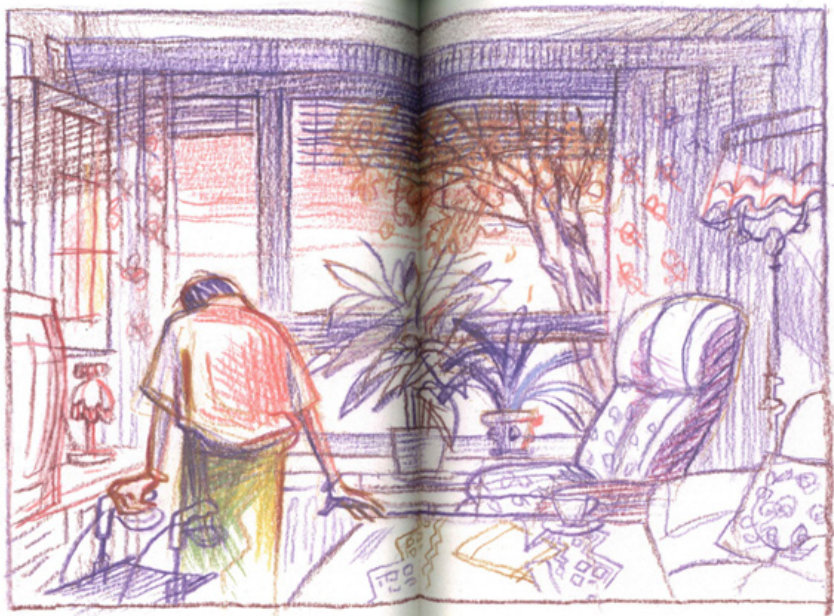


Figure 13. Bredesen 2023, unpaginated. Spread. © No Comprendo Press.

*My Mother* is filled with humour and interspersed with single panels in which Johanne makes a funny observation or is confused in ways that are both humorous and exasperating. Her interlocutor is often not shown, and this invites the reader to imagine themselves in the place of the one seeing, talking to, and (implicitly) drawing her. While Trond figures rather rarely as a character, and then only as a vague outline, there is still a marked sense of subjectivity to the narrative which highlights “the question of the relation and distance between a perceiving entity and a narratorial identity” (Mikkonen 2017, 146). Trond places himself in the role of witness: in terms of processes of kinship, he is focused on what takes place or is being said in the present, in the many, small moments of everyday interaction that continue to take place.

Bredesen’s filial memoir seems to oppose or challenge the idea that either the person with dementia or their carer needs “a story of their own”. Nor does it present an inner journey through past events, memories, and associations like the one portrayed in *But Who Are You?* Instead, Bredesen gives visual and narrative form to the present moment and how it is characterised by a being-together, a continuation of everyday interactions even as they are changing and, increasingly, troublesome. Life will simply go on, it seems, until the bed is empty, and that life is over. Even as Bredesen can be said to universalise experiences of old age and dementia by leaving out the past and, to a large degree, inviting the reader to take his place as witness, relatedness remains at the core of the aesthetic mediation of kinship that this graphic novel performs. The project seems to be about creating an intersubjective presence; a presence that is not simply that of his mother, but that of the relationship between her and the people and objects surrounding her, and between her and Trond. Bredesen’s drawings imply the presence of a familial gaze that saw Johanne this way, not just as “a woman”, “a mother”, or even “the woman who used to be my mother”, but as “my mother, even now”.

## Conclusion

*But Who Are You?* and *My Mother* show us that relatedness – even between close relatives – remains an ongoing process even when someone changes cognitively. As Bitenc proposes, “memoirs can be viewed as enacting a form of relational identity, which is both particularly pertinent and particularly troubled in the context of neurodegenerative disease” (Bitenc 2020, 136). This enactment takes different forms in *But Who Are You?* and *My Mother*. Where Erntsen draws heavily on the past and depicts an elaborate and conflicted inner process relying on memory,

association, and imagination, Bredesen is focused on the present and frequently uses metonymy to show how mechanisms of relatedness, including our relation to objects, remain central to how we perceive identity and relationality even as dementia increasingly affects cognitive functions and memory. What they have in common is their portrayal of continuing interactions with their parent, and an attention towards how the onset of dementia complicates and transforms the processes of relatedness that these interactions are part of. Both works can be said to focus primarily on what happens now and what might come next, even as the past figures heavily in *But Who Are You?* The categories used for exploring, understanding, and describing the filial relationship are not taken for granted as something fixed, but inquired as they unfold in concrete situations where parent and son are both present. The graphic novels thus become testaments “to the primary force of relationality in both shaping and maintaining identity” (Bitenc 2020, 154) and give examples of how this relationality is given aesthetic form through the comics medium.

The assumption that kinship is a processual and dynamic form of relatedness does not remove ethical concerns, ambivalences, or “relational challenges”. Indeed, I do not propose that a recourse to “intersubjectivity” or “relational identity” might solve the ethical problems related to telling or appropriating another’s story. To quote Bitenc, “narrativising the other’s life story, while serving the important function of memorialising the other, can never do justice entirely to the subjectivity of a person with dementia” (2020, 136). While the relational challenges connected to these kinds of narratives do remain, a kinship perspective might, however, help us to frame them differently – not as what hinders the free and autonomous narration of either the vulnerable subject or their carer, but as fundamental parts of the processes of relatedness that continuously mediate and remediate kinship. There are arguably no kinship relations that can avoid situations in which the health of one party causes changes that might “affect the nature of the relation” and “have serious and difficult consequences for the relationships the person is part of” (Bjørkøy 2020, 149, my translation), whether it be dementia or something else. From the perspective of literary criticism, the question is how aesthetic forms might help us explore what these consequences are, which processes inform the nature of the relation, and which relationship or sense of kinship and community might emerge when established relational practices are being transformed.

By giving narrative and visual form to different ways in which interaction, care, and memory work mediate kinship (understood as a continuing process of relatedness), graphic novels like *But Who Are You?* and *My Mother* explore how production of relatedness continues and transforms when one party has dementia.

But if kinship is understood as a processual social bond requiring mediation, these graphic novels also exemplify a specific kind of mediation, an aesthetic one, that participates in relational processes involving their readers. In scholarly work on dementia literature, it is suggested that life writing about persons with dementia can be seen as a “memorialising act” that “is part of caring” for them (Sako & Falcus 2019, 104). In a kinship perspective, this memorialising act takes the form of what El Refaie calls *commemoration*, involving a shift from the graphic novels’ depiction of family memory to what Erll, building on Jan and Aleida Assmann’s work, calls cultural memory (2011, 311).<sup>10</sup> Literary commemoration occurs on multiple levels: narrative content (where dementia alters family memory and relationships), form (where the comics medium mediates memory work caused by these changes), and context (where graphic novels contribute to broader cultural memory). As published works of art, *But Who Are You?* and *My Mother* both give aesthetic form to mediations of kinship and engage in the practices through which we produce and sustain social bonds on a collective level.

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10. A similar view is suggested by Marianne Hirsch (2008) in her analysis of Art Spiegelman’s graphic novel *Maus* (1986) as a work of what she calls postmemory, where she shows that familial and cultural memory processes are both mediated and merged by help of the comics medium.

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