

# **Lissa: A Story About Medical Promise, Friendship, and Revolution. Sherine Hamdy and Coleman Nye. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2017**

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*Lissa: A Story About Medical Promise, Friendship, and Revolution*. Sherine Hamdy and Coleman Nye. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2017.

In the graphic novel *Lissa: A Story About Medical Promise, Friendship, and Revolution* anthropologists Sherine Hamdy and Coleman Nye tell the story of Anna and Layla, two childhood friends growing up together in Egypt and whose cultural and religious differences lead them to live very different, yet connected lives.

Anna and Layla are composite characters; they are derived from hundreds of separate interviews conducted by Hamdy and Nye on “how social contexts shape medical decisions” (p. 264). The social contexts are contrasted and intertwined throughout the graphic novel. After the death of Anna’s mother, her father decides to move them back to the United States, leaving Egypt and her best friend behind. Into adulthood and oceans apart, Anna and Layla are both faced with tough medical decisions. Layla’s father finds out he has kidney disease and will only live if he is to have a transplant. He refuses to let his children donate, ultimately choosing to leave his fate in the hands of God. At the same time, Anna learns she is living with the BRCA1 mutation, increasing her chance of developing breast cancer like her mother. Anna must decide whether or not to have a preemptive mastectomy and trust her fate in the hands of modern medicine.

Although Layla urges Anna not to have the mastectomy, lamenting, “Here we don’t have enough medicine. There, you’ve got too much” (p. 119), back in America, Anna chooses to go through with the surgery. Upon returning to Egypt following the death of Layla’s father, Anna hides her surgery from her friend. To further complicate the story, in the background of these medical emergencies, the Egyptian Revolution has begun, reminding readers of the influence of politics on lived experiences, including medical decision-making. The graphic novel ends with Anna and Layla walking through the streets of Cairo when Anna tells her friend about the surgery. Anna tells Layla, “I changed my body so that I could have a better future... but here, now you’ve risked your life for the exact same reason” (p. 228). The two continue on their walk, stopping at a wall covered in graffiti. The word *lissa* in Egyptian Arabic covers the wall, and Layla tells Anna that it means “not yet” or “still”, signifying a hope for the future that is not lost.

In the graphic novel’s foreword, anthropologist George E. Marcus defines the word transduction: “the action or process of converting something, and especially energy or a message, into another form” (*Webster’s Third New International Dictionary*). By weaving anthropological concepts and ethnographic methods into a graphic novel, Hamdy and Nye are doing just this. Illustrations by Sarula Bao and Caroline Brewer tell the story of sociopolitical conflict, medical decision-making, and friendship, urging readers to understand the anthropological through the visual. While much of the story is told in the dialogue between Layla and Anna, much is also told through the graphics themselves. The reader can understand the cultural, social, and religious influences and implications in the decisions made by Anna’s and Layla’s families throughout the graphic novel, along with the fear, sadness, and sense of hope from both characters. Sometimes, what is not said is as important as what is.

*Lissa* is an example of what anthropologists can create when there is an emphasis on engaged scholarship. When anthropologists collaborate and think outside of the box, graphic novels like *Lissa* can come to life and encourage new readership. Individuals learn and process information in different ways, and in using a new medium to share their work, Hamdy and Nye are expanding the possibilities of public anthropology and who it can benefit. Ethnography has been the hallmark of anthropological studies, however, its readership is often limited to that of other anthropologists and academics. Many in the discipline are working towards approaches that are more accessible and attractive to the public. Hamdy and Nye are engaging a new group of readers and in doing so, are rethinking and revisualizing ethnography.

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