The Authority File: Episode 433 Transcript

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Bill Mickey: So I want to take a closer look at the book, *Graphic Refuge*, and maybe to start, Candida, can you talk about the origins of the book? Why was the writing process unique compared to other scholarly monographs.

Candida Rifkind: Yeah, it is a different kind of process. But I'll start with how it all began. So I met Dom at a conference that he organized in 2017, at Oxford, on I think it was on travel and comics or comics and travel, and I was presenting there on a book by Tings Chak, who's a Chinese Canadian artist, called *Undocumented - The Architecture Of Migrant Detention*, which we actually don't talk about much in this book.

Candida Rifkind: because we've both written about it in other places. But Dom and I just clicked at that conference. We had similar interests, similar ways of wanting to shift the way we read refugee comics in scholarship, away from focusing on trauma and suffering and kind of individual stories, to think more about the spaces and systems that we're seeing represented so Dom and I, you know, met there and then he was editing a volume

Candida Rifkind: called *Documenting Trauma in Comics*, and I came on board as a coeditor, and in that volume we're really happy to have a kind of international set of contributors looking at all kinds of comics

Candida Rifkind: mostly about war and conflict, but some about personally traumatizing experiences as well, and it turned out that Dom and I worked together very well, even though he's in London, and I'm in the middle of Canada and Winnipeg we have similar interests. I think we even have similar grammatical obsessions when it comes to editing other people's writing, and we just we get along really well. And so we were both working on similar comics and always showing up on the same panels

Candida Rifkind: conferences because organizers would see the overlaps, and you know I was always wondering what's Dom up to. So it occurred to me why not work together, and academic publishing is quite competitive and hierarchical. And even though we're told all the time that collaborative research is valued, I think there is a strong emphasis on the solo authored monograph, especially for people's 1st books, but Dom and I both already had those out and published. And so we decided to write this book together.

Candida Rifkind: But at some point we realize that although we have similar interests, we actually have little separate pockets of interest. So, for instance, Dom's very interested in those Mediterranean crossings and those sea journeys and comics. I'm very interested in camps and

the representation of camps they overlap, but they're quite different sets of images and kinds of stories and kinds of experiences.

Candida Rifkind: So we decided, rather than co-authoring, which would be that kind of back and forth over email or zoom and editing each other's sentences, and so on. The main part of the book would be separately written, and we would each write 3 of the 6 chapters, and then we would co-write an introduction and an epilogue.

Candida Rifkind: and along the way we realized that each of our chapters worked with another one of the other person's chapter, so we could subdivide the book into 3 sections, and we've kept our names on those chapters, but we cross-reference each other, and I refer to Dom as Davies in the 3rd person. But sometimes, when we write together in the intro and epilogue, we refer to ourselves as we. So that's my view on it. But I'll throw it to Dom to add in.

Dominic Davies: I mean, I think we wrote this book over, I remember writing a 1st draft of one of the 1st chapters in the very 1st summer of the 1st covid lockdown. So which feels to me like, you know, over a long time, and it was really great to work collaboratively over that time. So it took us about 5 years to bring this to finish, you know, to finish the book from the kind of the 1st drafts through to through to the final publication.

Dominic Davies: And you know we both had personal things going on in that time we were both grappling with Covid, different life events come up, and it was really refreshing to be able to sort of hand across the baton to someone else who you really trusted, candidate. No, I completely trust Canada to move the project forward, and you know, if you're working on your own, and you can't work on something for 6 months you come back to it and nothing's happened, but actually, with what was lovely is that I would, you know, maybe go and do fulfill some other obligations for 6 months and come back, and Canada would have moved the whole project on.

Dominic Davies: And that would be so exciting and inspirational. Then that would spur me to do the same. And so we had a really great back and forth. So yeah, we keep those chapters sort of individually named. But it's really a dialogue. And I think, as one of our peer reviewers pointed out, actually, that that dialogism, that kind of dialogic form, the idea of that this is a conversation is very, is really sort of woven into the book in so many ways, in the sense that

Dominic Davies: comics are a relationship between artists and readers or a conversation, you know more than other texts in some ways. And obviously, there's the conversations within the book that we're joining with other comics. Critics. So yeah, we really value that structure. And I think it comes through in the sort of final manuscript.

Bill Mickey: Yeah, that's a that's a really cool observation. I like that. So are the writers and artists that you choose to include in the book? Are they people with lived experiences as refugees, you know, and then, you know, if an author is not a refugee, what are the implications of an artist communicating a refugee's story? Candida, I'll go to you on that one.

Candida Rifkind: Sure. Maybe I'll answer your 1st question, and then Dom can answer the second one, because that question of what are the implications of a non refugee artist telling the story. That's kind of our other big ethical and theoretical question in the book alongside with, Who are these comics for so in terms of, are they people with lived experience? It's a mix. So we certainly have artists and writers in the book who have experience being refugees or are second generation. They might have been left their home country as children or babies, and they've grown up in households in the UK, US, Australia, Canada

Candida Rifkind: with that experience kind of overshadowing all their lives. So we consider them to be part of the refugee experience as well. But in terms of people. We look at Hamid Suleiman, whose Freedom Hospital is a book that Dom looks at, and Mara Al-subani, whose memoir The Battle for Home. Both of these are people who have lived through Syrian conflict and displacement.

Candida Rifkind: We also, Dom looks at Marwan Hisham's Brothers of the Gun, which is illustrated by Molly Crabapple. That's a great example of a collaboration between a refugee artist and a non-refugee or a refugee writer, and a non-refugee artist.

Candida Rifkind: And then, in the final chapter, I look at the second generation. So Dom's already mentioned the US-Palestinian artist, Leila Abdelrazaq, and her wonderful memoir, *Baddawi* of her father's time in a Lebanese camp in the fifties and sixties and seventies. And then, perhaps one of the best known graphic narratives we look at is the autobiography, The Best We Could Do by Thi Bui,

Candida Rifkind: who's a Vietnamese American artist, and that has been very widely read and critically acclaimed, and The Best We Could Do is been part of some of those mass reading events like one book, one city or librarian or university organized reading events.

Candida Rifkind: And then alongside Thi Bui, I look at a perhaps lesser known Vietnamese Australian artist now based in New York, Matt Huynh, who publishes a lot of work online about his childhood suburb Cabramatta, which is on the outskirts of Sydney, Australia. And it was kind of a heroin capital, a drug sort of fueled neighborhood during his childhood that has since been cleaned up and gentrified. But a lot of the xenophobia and racism directed towards Vietnamese refugees in Australia also came with the idea that they brought criminality

Candida Rifkind: and gangs and the drug trade, and he has a very different perception of that neighborhood, having been a refugee child there for him. Even the members of those Vietnamese gangs who were young people. He treats them with great empathy, because he sees how they were neglected, and they were kind of left to fend for themselves because they were teenagers when they fled Vietnam.

Candida Rifkind: So we certainly have that firsthand and secondhand experience. And then we have another group of artists in the book, like Sarah Glidden, who's a Jewish American cartoonist, and her book *Rolling Blackouts*, is based on her joining some journalists traveling through Iraq and visiting people who were displaced and considered refugees.

Candida Rifkind: And we also have people like Olivier Kugler, who, I've already mentioned, who went into camps in Syria, Syrian refugee camps in the Middle East and Europe, sponsored by Doctors Without Borders. So we have a range of people. And there are really important questions about that relationship. When we have a non-refugee artist telling or drawing refugee stories. It's really one of the big questions we have in the book, because we wanted to think about the ethics of that relationship and what we see on the pages as a result, so I'll throw it to Dom to pick up on that.

Bill Mickey: Sure.

Dominic Davies: Yeah. So in terms of comics that are made by artists or journalists or artist journalists who are not themselves refugees, but who are, for instance, traveling through refugee camps and interviewing refugees, or who are volunteering, or have been commissioned by MSF to go and make some comics. That sort of bring refugee stories to life, or indeed, like the example of Sarah Glidden, who I will come back to in a moment, who travels with a group of journalists

Dominic Davies: through Turkey, Iraq, and Syria, and sort of documents, their process of documenting refugee stories. It's really, it's very, very common, and it's very, very frequent and very, very powerful and big part of the refugee comics genre. There were a lot of reasons for that, but I think one of the main ones is that comic scholars talk about how comics allow us to see things twice right. We always see things twice in comics. We see the 1st story.

Dominic Davies: but then also because comics are made up of frames that you know, we see that what they're what they're showing us, but also what they're not showing us. We also see how we're seeing. So we kind of see ourselves seeing in a certain way. Right? So it's a very self-conscious medium. It's a kind of what we might think of as a meta narratological medium. It has the narrative, but it also has the Meta narrative, so it has the story, but also how the story was composed, so it allows people to reflect on

Dominic Davies: the way in which they've gathered refugee stories, whilst also, including those refugee stories as well, and the most extreme example here is Sarah Glidden's *Rolling Blackouts*, which I am completely fascinated by and dedicate a whole chapter to this one book I mean, the book is like 400 pages, so it is totally deserving of its own chapter. But I go very, very deep, so that that middle chapter is for real nerds of and fans of Sarah Glidden. But what Glidden does is she kind of,

Dominic Davies: that whole book there is a there are refugee testimonies in it. There's at the very center of the book is this kind of long interview with an Iraqi refugee, Samuel Malkandi, who went to the US and got was given refuge. And then who was deported back to Iraq on suspected terrorism charges. And what's really interesting is she, she's interested in that interview, but she's not just interested in telling Samuel Malkandi's story. She's really interested in the way in which the journalists go about gathering his story, and how actually, even the journalists

Dominic Davies: are a bit like the kind of FBI interrogators that deported Samuel Malkandi because they can't help, but they've got an idea of the story they want in their minds that will sell in the newspapers right? And so, even though they say they're there to be transparent, we watch as they start to interrogate him, they start to pressure him into certain answers, certain kind of lines of inquiry that he doesn't want to answer, and he

Dominic Davies: on several occasions just says, no, I'm just not going to talk about that, or I'm not going to go give you the line that you want. So we start to see this much richer tapestry of kind of, it's not a transparent window onto the refugee life world. It's actually a real sense of the politics around gathering these stories, and the kind of the difficulties of that kind of mode of graphic reportage.

Bill Mickey: And then what about in certain instances where the person who is either drawing or writing the comic, where, you know the interviewee may not want to talk to that person about their experience or share it. How do, how are the artists navigate those dynamics?

Dominic Davies: I'll continue with Sarah Glidden, and then I'm sure Candida can offer some examples, too. There's a very famous or very kind of this sort of climactic scene of Sarah Glidden's role in blackouts, where she's in a kind of refugee center and she's talking to a refugee, an Iraqi refugee who's been displaced to Syria. This is before the Syrian war broke out.

Dominic Davies: And there is a translator translating the words between Glidden, between sorry, the journalist and the refugee, and Sarah Glidden draws, writes, whenever the refugee speaks in Arabic, writes the speech in Arabic, and then writes the translator's balloon in English,

so we can see the kind of act of translation, and then we see moments when the translator either is unable to translate, or because of what the refugee says is being quite offensive and being like, Leave me alone, you don't understand what you're here for. You don't understand what you're doing. The translator chooses not to translate, so there's this moment of on the page where the reader can see that the refugee has said something

Dominic Davies: but if they're an Anglophone reader doesn't immediately know what that is, and they can choose to go and decode it if they want to. But it's this moment of kind of untranslatability, really, of kind of like you can't actually have knowledge, you don't have the rights to know everything that a refugee is feeling and saying all of the time, and that's a very humbling experience.

Bill Mickey: Yep.

Candida Rifkind: Yeah, I'll just add that there are lots of different tools comics can provide for this situation, right? So comics are made up of words and images, and some artists can choose to not draw someone who doesn't want to be drawn, but still get their experience and their testimony across in words if they want. So we talk in the book about refugee refusal, which is a kind of agency for someone who is a refugee who has had all their power taken away from them, to say to a reporter or a comics artist,

Candida Rifkind: I'm not going to tell you my story. I don't trust you with it, or I can't tell you my story, because I might be deported, or I might be arrested if I'm discovered through your representation of me. I have something really important at stake here. My life is at stake, and you're trying to make a comic out of it. So a lot of these questions come up. And one thing I'll just say in reference to Sarah Glidden is, she's in

Candida Rifkind: this kind of genre of comics journalism. And really, since Joe Sacco developed as kind of the father of Comics Journalism through books like *Palestine* and *Footnotes in Gaza* he goes to conflict zones. He always draws himself in the panels. And that's kind of coming out of American new journalism. People like Truman Capote and Joan Didion, you know, telling us journalism is not objective. It's a subjective experience. They write about their own

Candida Rifkind: feelings, about what they're reporting on, and comics really have picked up on that and do it visually. So Joe Sacco always draws himself, and Sarah Glidden draws herself. And I think that's really become the kind of standard convention for comics journalists to remind us. This is not any kind of authoritative objective point of view on the story. I'm a witness, and I'm going to draw myself witnessing. And sometimes I might draw myself, not understanding, or actually interfering in the situation in a negative way.

Candida Rifkind: But one example I'll give of this refugee refusal is in Olivier Kugler's *Escaping Wars and Waves*. Most of the book is made up of portraits of people he's met who want their portraits drawn, and they want to tell their story. They want the world to know what they've been through, and they also want the world to know they're not just a refugee,

Candida Rifkind: that they were a trained psychologist who worked with children, with autism in Syria, perhaps, as one woman does, and now she's working in the camp with people who are traumatized. She's skilled, she's educated, she's helping other people at the same time that she's separated from her husband and children, and she doesn't know what the future holds. So we see a lot of this kind of thickening of refugees' experiences through their faces and portraits.

Candida Rifkind: But at 1 point, towards the end of the book, when he's in the Calais camp in North France. Kugler has a whole page, and he calls it the Afghan, and he tells us he met a young man who was from Afghanistan who didn't want his picture drawn and didn't want his name revealed, and maybe didn't even want his story made public. And Kugler writes this out in words, but doesn't draw the man's face. Instead, he draws the ferries and the ports that he's been through as he's been trying to leave Calais.

Candida Rifkind: But at the very bottom of the page he draws a tiny little miniature version. It's almost like a Where's Waldo, like where is this man? You can't see his face. He's about 2 mm high, and he puts an arrow to him and tells us this is the man.

Candida Rifkind: So it's a complicated page to read, because, on the one hand, we're being told he didn't want his story known. I'm making his story known by telling you he didn't want it known and why, and I'm going to facilitate his anonymity by not drawing his face. But I'm going to show you he is a real person, but draw him in really tiny scale, walking away from us.

Candida Rifkind: It's a very self-reflexive page, and it's a page I'm a little bit uneasy with, still, because I'm not sure the artist always has the right to draw people who say they don't want to be drawn, even if they do these kind of comics-type tricks, using words, not drawing their faces. But it's certainly something I think all of the artists we look at reflect on in the work itself.

Bill Mickey: Yeah, that's fantastic, and so fascinating. Because when you were talking about the sort of comics journalism and adopting journalistic techniques, one of the things in journalism is, you are on the record or off the record, or you don't just automatically allow someone, or give someone, or expose somebody if they don't really want to be, if they're giving you some sensitive information. So, yeah, I think it sounds like that dynamic persists through even some of the more creative aspects of the medium.

Dominic Davies: Just to add very quickly, you know when it comes to the specific question of refugees, asylum seekers, migrants, this is a really urgent question, because being photographed and, you know, if you're someone who's arrived in Southern Europe and you're trying to get further into Europe,

Dominic Davies: if you're photographed in Greece, you'll be forced to claim asylum there. Conversely, if you're photographed in Germany, and then your asylum application is rejected and you're sent back to say, Syria, your life could be in danger. Your family might be put in danger, so this isn't just a kind of like, do you not want to be represented? It's a really kind of immediate sort of, in some cases, life or death question.