



# Swallow Me Whole

*Nate Powell*

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*Swallow Me Whole* is a love story carried by rolling fog, terminal illness, hallucination, apophenia, insect armies, secrets held, unshakeable faith, and the search for a master pattern to make sense of one's unraveling. Two adolescent stepsiblings hold together amidst schizophrenia, obsessive compulsive disorder, family breakdown, animal telepathy, misguided love, and the tiniest nugget of hope that the heart, that sanity, that order itself will take shape again.

## Swallow Me Whole Details

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Author : Nate Powell

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# From Reader Review Swallow Me Whole for online ebook

## Ella Boyd-Wong says

An important thing that I've discussed in multiple different classrooms spanning multiple different topics is the question of how format and content relate to each other within the context of literature. Does this book need to be written in first-person? Is it important that this is a poem, and not a short story or an essay? Powell's "Swallow Me Whole" is an excellent example of why the format used in presenting the content is an extremely important (if not the most important) aspect in determining the quality of the content as a whole. "Swallow Me Whole" would not be as effective as it currently is, were it a piece of written fiction rather than a graphic novel. The switches between scenes, characters, timelines, and subjects would not work as well, the emotions (especially more intense emotions, like fear, stress, anxiety, confusion, etc.) would not have been as accessible to the reader, particularly given the fact that they get more and more intense, as the novel comes to a close. The art style (the pointed, thick sketchiness, the use of uneven panels, the movement between white and black backgrounds, the use of full-page panels, the quiet recurring pill character, the filled-in darkness of corners and insects, and on and on) makes them more obvious, the coloring (or lack thereof) makes them more obvious, the changes between what can only be called mumbled handwriting and normal handwriting make them more obvious, but what especially makes the format help so much in this vein is seeing the connection between the words on the paper and the actual character. Of course, this is limited in written literature, given that it is not visual, but with something so inherently psychological and human as the characters and plotline presented in this graphic novel, every effort presented to see the characters, both their physical form and their emotional form, is incredibly effective and truly adds to the outstanding quality of this graphic novel.

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## Theresa says

I read the book Swallow Me Whole, by Nate Powell. The book is a black and white graphic novel. It tackles the subject of mental illness. The main characters are Ruth and Perry, teenage step siblings, their parents and a dying grandmother.

I do not normally read graphic novels, I think the format though, lent itself to providing the reader what it must feel like to be mentally ill. The lack of color and the dominant use of black left me with a sense of isolation and darkness and the sometimes tiny squiggly words made it difficult to read. There were moments I felt the things that were happening, happened without my total awareness. It felt like what I perceive mental illness to be like.

Ruth sees, hears and collects insects, the fact that only she can see and hear them increases her OCD by constantly reorganizing her display. I think she is trying to replicate their patterns of behavior and sound in her movement of the jars, interpreting messages only she can hear. Perry can see and hear a little wizard on the end of a pencil, it tells him what to draw, but we never see the drawings. Ruth eventually see a doctor and ends up taking medications, Perry does not. I like the fact that they have each other to help deal with their mental issues. They openly talk about the things only they can see.

The novel also deals with Grandma's cancer and death and funeral. After her last release from the hospital she comes to Ruth and Perry's house to die. She suffers bizarre reactions from her medications and chemo treatments, but her behavior seems to blend in with Ruth and Perry's.

The ending was not defined, it was more interpretive, leaving you to decide what happened. I think that in the end, Ruth is doomed to suffer from her mental illness but Grandma appears to Perry and warns him that

his mental illness could swallow him whole and he is okay, eventually.

I would recommend this book to anyone who enjoys graphic novels, I liked the drawings, Nate Powell is a talented artist and readers who appreciate the graphic talent will enjoy this book. I would also recommend this book to teens diagnosed with a mental illness or the siblings of a mentally ill teenager, knowing that there are others that are dealing with the same things may help them

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## **Troy says**

Damnit! I just wrote a long ass review and the goddamn internet ate it up and shit it out in some unknowable aether. Fuckers.

Whatever.

The review was good, but now you're just going to have to trust me on that because there's no way in fucking hell I'm re-typing it.

Anyway, I've been following Nate Powell since I found his punk-inspired minis, and he was and is one of the best draftsmen in comics today. That said, he often spirals off into doodle-y dream-narratives with tons of boring-to-read experimentations. He was and is great at straight-forward narratives, but seems to be bored by them.

In this book, he sublimates his love for experimentation with a solid story about a young girl in a family who seem to be predisposed to schizophrenia. It's powerful stuff, circumventing the tired coming of age bullshit with unreliable narrators, an obsession with death and a sick and dying grandmother, and an inability to distinguish reality from fantasy that is punctuated with frequent flights of fantasy, which are sometimes whimsical, but more often frightening and portent of doom. The narrative proceeds in fits and bursts and often follows an odd logic, which cumulates with a tour-de-force ending, which might be metaphorical, might be from the POV of an unreliable narrator, or might be an intrusion of the unreal upon reality. Whatever it is, it works, and is a hell of a way for Powell to combine his love and his strength as a cartoonist.

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## **Seth T. says**

It's almost cliché at this point to praise Nate Powell's *Swallow Me Whole*, but it's not like there's any honest alternative. The book is just too good for anything else. Talented illustrator? Check. Talented storyteller? Check. Imaginative? Funny? Insightful? Worthwhile? All systems are go. Powell's art reminds me of some delicate hybrid between Craig Thompson and David Lapham—and amusingly, *Swallow Me Whole* is like some strange cross-pollination between *Blankets* and *Silverfish*.

Okay, well not really. But kinda.

By the evidence of prior works (*Epileptic* and *It's a Bird* come to mind), the comics medium seems uniquely

suitable to the exploration of mental deviation-slash-illness. *Swallow Me Whole*, far from dispelling this sense of things, works to cement the place of comics as a vessel through which the well might come to better understand the unwell. My experience with those suffering under the fist of schizophrenia is limited to a relative I'll never know, so I can't speak very well to the accuracies of Powell's depiction but to say that it isn't so far from the stories I've been told by my relatives who survived the terror and oppression this one errant family member brought into the family by her delusions.

Often these illnesses are portrayed from the outside, from the viewpoint of a quote-unquote neutral observer. Powell gets to the heart of things by giving us two protagonists, Ruth and Perry (one medicated and one not), who labour under the grip of delusions they recognize to be delusions but have no recourse but to answer to their illusions. What's better is that we are allowed to experience their hallucinations somewhat as they experience them. Ruth's delusions are more intrusive and she embraces them with less hesitation, but Perry's can be no less intrusive and no less compulsive.

Where *Swallow Me Whole*'s real strength lies is in the fact that Ruth and Perry talk openly between themselves about the trials of their own branded delusions. Powell goes to pains to give breadth of soul to other family members despite offering them strictly limited screentime but the real focus is Ruth and Perry. Even though neither has any more experience of each other's hallucinations (Ruth's feature ambassador's from the insect kingdom and require a shrine of physical corpses while Perry's involve a diminutive wizard who resides primarily on the end of his pencil and forces him on *drawing missions*), they speak to each other with love and understanding. Even as the difficulties of their lives threaten to destroy them and their family, they have each other to hold onto and it seems only by their bond that they've survived as long as they have. These are two deeply involving and sympathetic characters who carry the book on the shoulders of their interactions with each other.

The book's conclusion is going to be the sticking point for most readers, either confusing them into distrusting the book or elevating it to a work of grand accomplishment. I fall into the latter of the two artificially-constructed catchall bins. There are, I think two valid interpretations for the finale—both of which are powerful and amazing. I'm not sure which reading I prefer—each has its merits—but in the final analysis, each shows the horrible power of this kind of disease and how acts of coping on one's part can destroy the lives of others. The climax is amazing and, whether taken literally or figuratively, demonstrates well Powell's grasp of the material. Great stuff!

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## Lobeck says

I had such high hopes for a longer comic by Nate Powell, but this book really fell short of my expectations. A lot of the story was hard to follow, which may have been somewhat intentional since the story deals with schizophrenia, but unfortunately that doesn't make it any less difficult to understand. If he had done a better job moving between external narrator and character experience, I would have had more tolerance for some of the confusion. For example, I discovered that the main characters were step-siblings, a fairly basic fact of the story, only when I read the back cover in hopes that it would shed some light on what was happening. I also didn't find the story particularly interesting, but it's hard to say how much of that had to do with the difficult-to-follow narrative style.

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## **Jana says**

This was strange, very strange, but captivating.

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## **Patrick says**

A series of disjointed thoughts seems like a good way to review a rather disjointed book.

1. I have no idea what this story was about, even after finishing it.
  2. I did enjoy it.
  3. I suspect I will remember this book, and think on it, much longer than other books that I probably enjoyed more.
  4. I wish I hadn't seen that this book dealt with "Schizophrenia and Hallucinations" before I read it. It colored my whole perception of the first quarter of the book.
  5. This was a comic.
  6. I found some of the panel-to-panel action hard to follow.
  - 6b. I suspect this was somewhat intentional.
  7. I found much of the dialogue script hard to read.
  - 7b. I expect this was also intentional.
  8. This was a fascinating look into the mind of a person (people?) who are differently wired in the head.
  - 8b. It was not a cohesive or particularly informative look into their minds.
  - 8bi. Again, I suspect this was intentional, given the subject matter.
  9. I'd like to go on the record that I read this book long \*after\* starting a certain short story which will probably be coming out later this year.
  10. I did like it. And would happily pick up other work by the author. He obviously has a solid grip on his craft.
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## **Orehling says**

(Note: I am writing this review/read this review for a class but, still took the time to think critically about the story. I read it all the way through and want to be transparent about the context around this review)

“Swallow Me Whole” gives the reader a deep and complex look into the effects of schizophrenia, while also weaving it into a humbling tale of growing up and the bonds of family. We follow stepsiblings Ruth and Perry (though Ruth is the center focus) as they are faced with frequent hallucinations along with caring for their aging grandmother (who has her own bouts with mental disabilities), trying to reconnect with their parents, and trying to come as close as they can to living a normal life.

When demonstrating schizophrenic visions to the viewer, Powell constructs a seemingly separate reality that can pop up at any time. Walks to class or time spent alone in their rooms can quickly be interrupted by visions of insects or wizards. It is largely exomimetic in nature, as Ruth and Perry, in a particular scene on a playground, speculate about what their hallucinations mean and attempt to rationalize them in the context of the “real world.”

When diving into this, Powell’s greatest strength are his illustrations. The best way for him to represent schizophrenia is by representing them through pictures of insects crawling from Ruth’s vent or talking frogs represented in vivid detail. Powell also uses his art to support moments in the story that are punctuated by large swaths of silence. A panel of Ruth staring silently out of a window or Perry’s wizard slowly appearing from his drawer say so much without the assistance of word bubbles. These two features come to a head at the end which left me poring over every picture on the page for some hidden detail to string together its meaning.

The only critique that jumps out at me is the pacing. There is a slow, natural build to a lot of the stories major themes except for things like relationships and Ruth’s job. Perry and Ruth jump very suddenly into relationships with other people and it was a bit jarring to me concerning time in the story. In addition, Ruth’s job at the museum is a very open-and-closed scene that I feel could have been drawn out a bit longer.

Altogether, I was enraptured by the accuracy and attention to detail Powell incorporates into each panel of the graphic novel and found myself becoming very attached to the characters and narrative that helps me truly understand the complicated facets behind Perry and Ruth’s struggle.

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## **Nicola Mansfield says**

This book is deep and difficult for me to write about as I'm not sure I "got" the whole thing. I'll make an attempt at my impressions. Two siblings both have psychological problems. The girl, Ruth, is the main character and suffers from delusions, paranoia, schizophrenia and OCD while her brother seems to suffer on a lesser degree from delusions. They also have their grandmother living at home with them as she is dying and also delusional. The book follows the girl's descent into madness while those around her stand by and do nothing. She recognizes her mind is different and so does her brother, together they can talk to each other about it. We watch as Ruth starts out trying to make her way through each day until in the end her illnesses smother and bury who she once was.

The book is done in black and white, with a lot of the pages having a black background. Many scenes have word bubbles with writing so tiny or scribbled it is unreadable, these are the background voices that Ruth doesn't hear in her world. The story is intense and yet, there is no real plot. The book tries to capture a feeling in words and pictures. I sort of enjoyed the book. Probably up to the mid-point I was enjoying it but honestly, I didn't see the point of the story. I have mental health issues myself (some of which were mirrored in the book) and the book seemed to just be saying to me, "Look, this is what it feels like to go crazy". Perhaps others will get more out of it. I recommend the book for higher aged teens because of the swearing (which includes the f-word) and a small amount of teenage sex.

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## **Tom Waters says**

Hook, Line & Sinker: Nate Powell's Swallow Me Whole

Once a year (at best), I come across a title so powerful that it compels me to stop back at the comic store and devour everything else that the author has written. From every standpoint imaginable, Swallow Me Whole by Nate Powell is an unmitigated masterpiece. You can read four dozen black and white titles this year before you find something that even begins to approach the beauty, scope, originality and genius of this story. I'm not one to heap praise when it's not warranted, but I can't say enough about this book. My eyes have been opened.

The book follows the growth of two teenaged siblings with deep developmental and psychological issues. The brother hallucinates a small gnome that appears on every writing utensil he uses who orders him to draw until he's exhausted. The girl comes to terms with obsessive compulsive disorder while stealing and compiling a bug and amphibian collection out of a personal obligation to represent each species. This is not your everyday material. I urge you to read it anyway.

From an artistic standpoint, Powell soars off the page by playing with (and ignoring) the classic use of panels to tell a comic story. In the beginning chapters of the book, many pages don't use panels at all to border each moment. While it may not seem like such a quantum leap, the impact for the reader is potent as well as palpable. I've never seen anything like it, and it's going to change the way I read comics from here on out. The story also explores the notion that mental illness travels through DNA by looking at the family's ailing grandmother, who passes her ailment on in more ways than one while dispensing advice to her grandchildren about how to turn a crutch into a creative monsoon. The book spans the siblings' growth and deterioration through high school and beyond along with their parent's ability to cope with not one, but two 'problem children' who require extra attention while they house a dying matriarch.

Disturbing? Yes. Deeply personal? Absolutely. The best serious comic I've read since Black Hole? You better believe it. Nate Powell is a creator to be on the lookout for. After talking to industry enthusiasts about his work and sharing the book with others, the general consensus contends that this is his first major effort as an artist. Powell has hit his stride with a sonic boom and then some. Buy this book at once. Beg, borrow or barter and go to your local comic retailer at once. In an industry clogged with 'me too' titles, sequels and variations on existing superhero storylines, tales like this (which don't come down the pike often enough) need to be encouraged. Even though there are two more months left to this calendar year, I can state with full confidence that this is the best title I'll read. Swallow Me Whole is a masterpiece that fires on all cylinders, artistically, thematically and emotionally. Powell is an artist to look out for from this point on. Consider yourself warned.

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## **Irmak says**

Sevmedim. Üzgün surat.

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## **David Schaafsma says**

Revision of review 4/9/17

Powell worked for several years with young people with developmental disabilities, something I also did for



a shorter time. He also ran a punk record label and performed in several bands. . . and oh, yeah, does these amazing, detailed graphic novels and stories, including the series that took him and his co-authors to The National Book Award in 2016, March, the graphic memoir from Sen. John Lewis of the Civil Rights movement in the US, which Powell illustrated. But *Swallow* was my very first encounter with him, a story about a family dealing with a dying grandmother who is losing it, and a brother and sister dealing with early onset schizophrenia, something that statistics tell me is something much more common than I had imagined.

The focus in *Whole* is on the two kids, with primary focus on the girl's more serious, less able to hide, experiences, her visual hallucinations and obsessions. I read this initially and again as a parent whose son has been hospitalized for related issues, so it was scary for me, in the sense that it felt a little more real to me than just any graphic story, of course. In my late teens and twenties, too, I worked in a psych ward with teens who were, among other things, schizophrenic, hallucinating, paranoid, what they then called manic-depressive, so I have had some powerful experiences with this stuff. Powell wants us to experience what it may feel like to live in two worlds, the "real" world and this hallucinatory one that is unfortunately just as real, and with some folks, this secondary world takes over your "other" life. Sad, and frightening, though Powell also captures the anguish (and some attractions/fascinations associated with it beautifully, I think. Reminds me a bit of David B's attempt to depict what he imagines his brother's epilepsy to be, which is of course another sad and anguished story, and also Craig Thompson's *Blankets*, where he tries to mostly visually capture the swirling, romantic falling of first love. What I'm pointing to here is the way comics can attempt to "capture" the emotional aspects of experience, through metaphor.

I've now taught/read this book several times. I had the occasion to meet Powell, who said it this was his favorite, his most personal book. Some students don't like it for the very reason I do like it: his almost indecipherable hand lettering, which I think helps you understand auditory hallucinations in a way as happening sometimes just on the edge of "normal" hearing, and also helps you recall the mumbling of quiet, alienated young people, their sometimes disjointed, fanatical and unexplained experiences, which are told here to help us understand the experience of hallucinations.

Some of the images are very scary, the stuff of horror, which is what schizophrenics must regularly wrestle with. It's not fun to read, but there's a kind tenderness to the relationship between the brother and sister, who both suffer from the disorder in different ways. The fear, and the coming to terms (in part) with themselves as humans possessing these unwanted perceptions, that's heart wrenching. Powerful, I thought. Not for everyone, maybe. But as I said, I connect with it in part for family and work reasons. As a teacher, you know you have kids in your classrooms that hear voices and have hallucinations, and are medicated, but you don't always know this. Oliver Sacks in *Hallucinations* makes it clear that what we think of as misperception (think: mirages, and so on) is much more common than most people think.

This last reading, completed April 9, 2017, feels like the grimmest time I have read this book, because in part the future seems scary for my now 17 year old son. It's like looking deeply into the heart of darkness, into madness itself. It's terrifying, really, though. I'm also reading Ron Powers's book *No One Cares About Crazy People*, and sometimes ride the trains to work here in Chicago with plenty of homeless people, some of whom I see are having psychotic episodes, who used to be better protected in and by institutions. The world seems like a meaner, less supportive place to me for people that Powell writes about, for people like my son, than when I worked in the psych hospital in the seventies.

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## **Sarah Beaudoin says**

I expected Swallow Me Whole to be a sweet, melancholy story of adolescence. I was unprepared for how disturbing and sad it is. I was also disturbed to get partway into the book and realize that the awesomely cute character Powell had drawn in my signed copy was actually an anthropomorphic pill.

There are a lot of pills in Swallow Me Whole. The story centers around siblings Ruth and Perry, who each have their hidden adolescent demons which manifest in different ways. Perry draws and Ruth obsesses over insects. They live with their parents and fading grandmother. Powell draws an incredibly sympathetic portrait of the grandmother, switching between the elderly woman others perceive and the young woman she sees herself as. I don't know that I have ever seen a kinder treatment of the elderly in fiction, despite her physical and mental infirmities.

Powell should be commended for how artfully he handles such difficult topics. This is a heavy book and while I expected the graphical nature to lessen the impact, it does not. I think this could easily be a great short story but as a graphic novel, it is immensely powerful. It is amazing how much loneliness, fright, and sadness Powell is able to capture with just ink and paper.

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## **Sarah says**

I didn't like this book. It was really confusing and hard to follow - partially because the characters were not introduced in a clear way in the beginning and partially because the drawings were so muddled it was often hard to tell what you were looking at. Some of that was stylistic choices - I guess this is what it feels to be schizophrenic? - but really it just made the book confusing to the point where it was hard to care about any of the characters because you never really knew what was going on. At some point it just feels pretentious and pomo, and I'm not really into the whole 'weird for the sake of being weird' thing. I don't recommend.

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## **Derek Royal says**

This is another work of Powell's I've had for awhile, but I've just been lax in getting to it. And shame on me for waiting, as this is truly an engaging story. I'm more familiar with Powell's historically based comics more than I have been the fiction, but here is a shining example of what the creator is capable of pulled purely from his experiences and imagination. I read this as a result of our recent review of Powell's latest book, You Don't Say, part of one of our review episodes of the podcast: <http://comicsalternative.com/episode-....>

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