Cuckoo

Cuckoo was a series of comics books and a play created by Madison Clell about her experience with DID.

Quick Details

Type: Autobiographical comics, play
Created: 1996-2010
Location: http://madisonclell.com/cuckood-i-d/

Circumstances of Cuckoo's Creation

Cuckoo's co-publisher, Kim Hecht, wrote, "Some time ago Madison approached me and said she was planning to write and illustrate a comic about her experiences as an individual with Dissociative Identity Disorder (D.I.D), or 'Multiple Personality Disorder', as it was called at the time. [...] I wondered how anyone could illustrate such a 'serious' and 'complex' experience as D.I.D. in a comic format? And would she really be able to not only look all those rough experiences in the eye and lay them out on paper?" (Cuckoo #1, inside front cover)

Cuckoo #1 was published by Green Door Studios (formed by Clell and Hecht) in Fall 1996. It sold for $2.75 ($3.50 in Canada).

Comics' Art Style and Content

Cuckoo was originally solely in black and white, with heavy chiaroscuro style inspired by the work of Frank Miller, specifically *Sin City* (citation needed). Starting with Issue #4, the covers became color paintings.

Cuckoo chose to depict system members as separate people in corporeal space, interacting like anyone else. Non-system members (that is, corporeal people like Clell's boyfriend) were distinguished from system members with a symbol on their clothes resembling a cartoonish planet Saturn or a circle with a diagonal narrow rectangle superimposed on top of it.

Many of the comics were short strips and stories reflecting on topics including individual trauma, individual system members, and slice-of-life tidbits focusing on things like banking while multiple, health insurance woes, and commentary on "Autobiography in Five Short Chapters" by Portia Nelson (or, as Clell subtitles it, "Therapists' Favorite Metaphor for Their Struggling Clients"). However, starting in Issue #5, the series starts on "the Long Story," a more involved narrative about Clell's discovery of her multiplicity and trying to deal with it; the comic never completes this story.

Asides from the actual story content of the comics, the floppy issues of *Cuckoo* also included various ephemera, including:

- Book reviews and recommendations
- Letters from readers
- Blurbs from Andrew Vachss, Trina Robbins, Donna Barr, Carla Speed McNeil, etc.

The Comic's Printing History

Cuckoo ran for thirteen floppy issues, with the final issue coming out in summer 2002; in that final issue, there is an excited announcement: "***CUCKOO*** COMPILATION BOOK TO BE PRINTED IN SUMMER, 2002--

more than 250 pages from issues 1-13!!!" (Cuckoo #13, inside front cover).

Indeed, in 2002, the trade paperback of *Cuckoo* was published by Green Door. It was 291 pages, and while it included most of the floppy comics' content, it did not contain all of it. It had an introduction from Dr. "Patch" Adams. A second volume was supposed to come out to complete the story, but the comic was never completed (citation needed). Thus, to learn the full story of *Cuckoo*, one needs to read not just the comics, but the play.

The Play

There's some conflict over when the play debuted. On her website, Clell says 2008 (n.d.), but in the trade paperback version of the play script, it reads, "CUCKOO debuted in February 2009" (pg. 9). And yet, a newspaper article from 2007 says the show was already running (Staff Report, May 31). Regardless of the year, it debuted in San Francisco (Clell, n.d. and 2013). "The director was Rebecca Longworth, and the movement coach was Paoli Lacy. Production design was by Mike Lewis, lighting design by Neil Satterlund, and sound design by George Mauro. The stage manager was Daniel Schultz. Animators were Justin Willow nad Rebecca Longworth. Master electrician was Irish Schimandle and board operator was Zack Leuchars" (Clell, 2013).

In the play, system members were played by different actors, and one system member, Fairy Child, had no body actor at all, but instead was a drawing projected on a screen with a voice actor (pg. 12).

In the "Direction & Production Notes," the play states, "In the original production, alters wore converse [sic] tennis shoes to distinguish themselves from non-alters. Alters' shoes were one solid color, but Adriene's [the host's] were either multiple colors, or sparkly. Whenever an alter pops out, Adriene becomes completely floppy. Projections from CUCKOO comics, as well as newly-drawn pictures, were utilized in this play." (pg. 11)

The play's script became its own trade paperback, printed in 2013 by JUMP! Theatre and Green Door Studios. Due to the inherent difficulties of "trying to stuff years of experiences into two hours of entertainment," the play does not go as in-depth as the comics do, though it does have a complete story, ending with Clell's integration.

Inner Mythos

Cuckoo is one of the few places where the power of story or an inner mythos in plurality is discussed at all. In the play, system member Adriene describes it as "the Epic Sci-fi story" to her headmates: "That whole universe STAMPED in our head since forever! I tried and tried to write it down as a kid, but it was terrible! Now I can see that I was doing it alone! Duh! But NOW, with your extra energy and brains, we can do it! Maybe you can give tips on drawing. Maybe you guys can help give SUGGESTIONS to ME on what to say." (pg. 79) The rest of the system snickers, and Adriene's headmate Lisa responds, "You're just gathering the FACTS, now! Soon we can write the entire story of us!" (pg. 80) That story becomes *Cuckoo.*

A 2007 newspaper article goes into a little more detail. "Madison Clell, as many youngsters often do, developed an elaborate imaginary world as a child. The world was so spectacular it warranted documentation and at age 7, Clell, an aspiring novelista, began her first attempt at crafting 'the epic novel.'

"'Every year I started to write it, but thought it sucked. I'd wait and try it again the next year. I thought for sure by fifth grade I'd have it,' she says.

"Fifth grade came and went, and Clell had yet to complete her grand opus. By the timeshe reached high school, she discovered comic books and decided to chronicle her fantasy world in graphic novel form instead.

"Fast-forward to the tail end of college — a series of events led Clell to seek therapy and it was there that she discovered her make-believe world was actually rooted in reality; she was diagnosed with dissociative identity disorder, formerly known as multiple personality disorder.

“'It struck me as a tremendous metaphor for my life. Once I knew that these fantasy characters were actually alters, I knew that I couldn’t go back and do this as a fantasy epic,' Clell says." (Staff Report, 2007 May 31)

Awards

The *Cuckoo* comics were nominated for three Ignatz Awards, but never won any of them: in 1999 for "Promising New Talent," (Comic Book Awards Almanac, 1999) and in 2000 for "Outstanding Series," and "Outstanding Comic" (Comic Book Awards Almanac, 2000).

Citations

Clell, Madison. (n.d.). Purchase Comics [web page]. Retrieved 2019/03/14 from http://madisonclell.com/purchase-comics/

Clell, Madison. (1996, Fall). Cuckoo #1 [comic]. Green Door Studios.

Clell, Madison. (2001, Autumn). Cuckoo #12 [comic]. Green Door Studios.

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Comic Book Awards Almanac. (1999). 1999 Ignatz Award Nominees and Winners [web page]. Retrieved 2019/03/14 from http://www.hahnlibrary.net/comics/awards/ignatz99.php

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Staff Report. (2007, May 31). Jump! Theatre goes 'Cuckoo' [newspaper article] San Francisco Examiner. Retrieved 2019/03/14 from http://www.sfexaminer.com/jump-theatre-goes-cuckoo/

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