



Mental Health Graphic Medicine Discussion Guide:

Marbles: Mania, Depression, Michelangelo, and Me by Ellen Forney

From the publisher... “Shortly before her thirtieth birthday, Ellen Forney was diagnosed with bipolar disorder. Flagrantly manic but terrified that medications would cause her to lose her creativity and livelihood, she began a years-long struggle to find mental stability without losing herself or her passion. With dazzling storytelling, bold illustrations, and razor-sharp wit, *Marbles* offers a wholly unique and visceral glimpse into the effects of a mood disorder on an artist’s work and seeks to answer: IS mental illness a curse, or is it actually a gift?”

Why a Graphic Novel?

- Research suggests that we are better at understanding and absorbing information presented in visual forms, such as comics.
- Stories are more engaging than factual information alone. How much easier is it to remember and empathize with something a friend experienced versus hard statistics alone?
- Coined by Ian Williams, a physician in the UK, Graphic Medicine “is the intersection of the medium of comics and the discourse of healthcare.”
 - Graphic medicine, then, combines visual storytelling and medicine, creating a unique opportunity for readers to experience and learn about healthcare experiences through comics.

To Learn More...

- www.graphicmedicine.org – The home base for all things graphic medicine.
- *The Graphic Medicine Manifesto* by MK Czerwiec et al. Available from Penn State University Press.



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Questions for Discussion

1. In *Marbles* we see Ellen riding the “rollercoaster” of mania and depression and through the power of her illustrations, we are able to live it with her. How did you find the experience of living these major ups and major downs?
2. Did you appreciate the visual aspects of this book? Do you think the format of a graphic novel is more or less effective for a memoir than for a fictional account? How is it different than a memoir written in prose?
3. Does the book remind you of an aspect of your own life? A particular event? A person – like a friend, family member, co-worker, etc.?
4. Can you point to specific passages/panels that struck you personally? Why?
5. Did *Marbles* change your perspective on bipolar disorder and/or mental illness generally? If so, how? If not, why not?
6. Most of us have a mental image of what therapy **IS** in a normative sense. How did *Marbles* challenge (or reaffirm) your personal image of what therapy is supposed to look like?
7. Ellen spends a great deal of time exploring the connection between her art and her illness – in fact, it is in some ways the central theme of the book. What do you make of this exploration? Do you think there is a connection between great art and mental illness?
8. Ellen gave a powerful description of the long, lengthy, and expensive process of finding the best management for her bipolar disease. It is also clear that she is lucky to have strong family ties and sound financial standing. How might her story have been different if she weren't in such a supported position?
9. Have you read other memoirs or stories about bipolar disorder (or mental illness generally)? How does *Marbles* compare to them?
10. Ellen has been accused of being an “oversharer” in reviews of this book. Do you agree? Why or why not?
11. Would you share *Marbles* with people in your life? Why or why not?

Remember: These are just suggested questions and there could be many, many more. Don't feel tethered to these – let the conversation flow naturally and use these questions as starting points when conversation stalls.