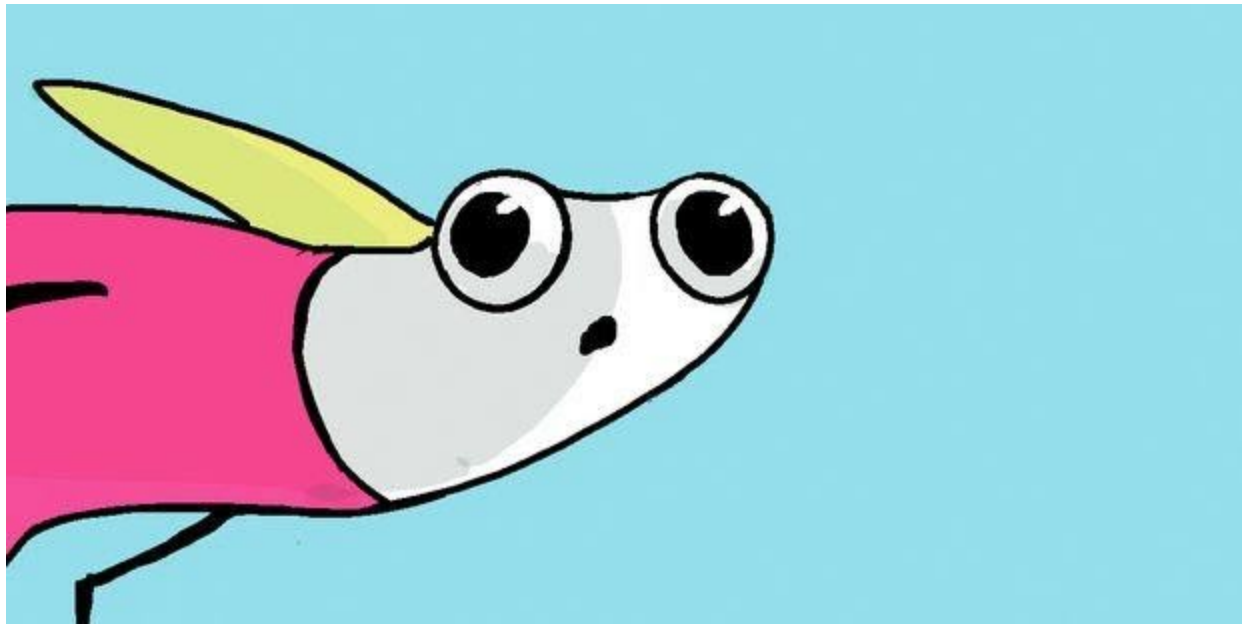


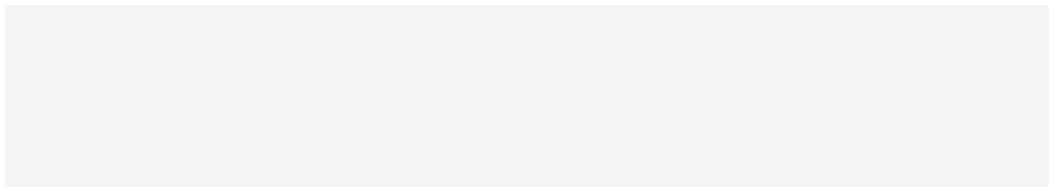
Men, Women, Dogs, Lists & Charts

Allie Brosh and Liana Finck explore the painful truths of life in cartoons that are also wildly funny.



An illustration from Allie Brosh's 'Solutions and Other Problems' PHOTO:
GALLERY BOOKS

By Sarah Boxer Jan. 29, 2021 11:16 am ET



Since “Brosh” and “Finck” almost rhyme with “brush” and “ink,” you might think these two cartoonists, young and female in a male-dominated line of work, go together like, well, brush and ink. Allie Brosh, famous for her blog and her hilarious first book, “Hyperbole and a Half,” and Liana Finck, known for her wildly popular Instagram posts, her New Yorker drawings and “Passing for Human: A Graphic Memoir,” are actually nothing alike. But they sure have a lot in common.

Both draw what might be called metaphysical comics, shunning the cartoon “realism” that’s been in vogue for years. Like stand-up comedians, each uses herself as material by creating a persona that must have something to do with the person (but how much?). Both are semi-hermits or would like to be. (Ms. Brosh describes herself as a recluse “living in her bedroom in Bend, Oregon.” Ms. Finck has remarked in her comics that one of the greatest joys of her life is when someone cancels a date with her.) And both, despite being at the top of their game, seem perched on the edge of sanity.

SOLUTIONS AND OTHER PROBLEMS By Allie Brosh, *Gallery Books*, 518 pages, \$30

EXCUSE ME By Liana Finck, *Random House*, 399 pages, \$20

Here's a quote from "Solutions and Other Problems," that captures their common puzzlement: "Unfortunately, the world doesn't make sense . . . Not if you keep poking it . . . In fact, the harder you poke it, the less sense it makes." Both Ms. Finck and Ms. Brosh keep poking at the world, but their pokers, their poking styles, and the things they poke are totally different.

Ms. Finck, who lives in New York, keeps flinging herself into social situations—dating, talking, partying, cafe-going—and then graphing each particular kind of pain she suffers. Ms. Brosh, however, has largely given up on relationships and sociability itself. (She was once married, she says, to a nice guy, who in this book appears in an episode about a ski outing that devolves into an incomprehensible, take-no-prisoners fight over bananas.)

Ms. Brosh is LOL funny. She draws herself (using Paintbrush, the software program) with bug eyes, skinny fly arms, a yellow ponytail that sticks out her head like a horn. She usually wears a magenta-triangle dress or, when extra-depressed, a gray hoodie. Ms. Finck, while seemingly a more sociable person, has an ingrown cerebral vibe in her art. Her cartoon alter ego is a tiny, hunched

figure drawn with a shaky ink line. It often takes a beat or two to get her humor. Ms. Finck is “Hmmm . . .” funny.

Clearly Ms. Finck has been around the dating world. She is most irritated by white male privilege and (to a lesser extent) by the females who enable it. One comic, for instance, shows a man and woman holding hands. She says: “I don’t want your last name. Can I have your sense of entitlement instead?”

My favorite drawing in her latest book, “Excuse Me: Cartoons, Complaints, and Notes to Self,” is of a table of three women sewing. Two are totally absorbed with their needlework. A third woman in a headscarf (who looks like an extra from Ms. Finck’s first book, “A Bintel Brief: Love and Longing in Old New York”) stitches too, but also anxiously observes what the other two are up to. The caption is: “Women making excuses for men.” It’s a perfect melding of art and words—dry, acid, intensely concrete and abstract at the same time.

Several excellent pages of “Excuse Me” are devoted to “Excuse Me” comics. One depicts a woman sitting at a tiny cafe table approached by a man gesturing toward an empty chair. He says, “Excuse me, do you mind if I sit here and bore holes in you with my eyes?” Another shows a bland-looking woman ready to pull the chair

out from under its sitter, who wears a murderous side glance (a stand-in, I assume, for Ms. Finck): “Excuse me,” says the chair stealer, “is anyone using this chair?”

Ms. Finck is quite fond of equivalences, charts, graphs, tables, lists and Venn diagrams. One of her best lists is “Things I ‘Liked’ for Men,” which begins with Star Trek and Victoria’s Secret, moves to Steely Dan and Jay-Z, then on through the Cardinals, the Browns, the Yankees, the Mets, the Jets and the Heat, and ends with Hegel and Gatorade. The humor is reduced, tart, mathematical.

Ms. Brosh by contrast is a deranged graphic storyteller without peer. Alienation is her subject. Spillage is her style. Her best characters are herself, her little sister (drawn with pigtails in a yellow onesie), her dogs (crazed, stupid or both) and her technological devices (hard to control). She appears to have more complex relationships with rocks and car sound systems than with people. She is like a confused dog trying to make sense of things.

Her animal stories are superb. One features a dog, decked out like a green bug, who’s been taken to a human birthday party. The poor creature clearly is not clued in on human ways, but gamely goes along. Ms. Brosh imagines being inside the dog’s head as he tries to figure out the chaos. “Hello . . . Excuse us . . . Is . . . *this* . . .

forever? And will we still be doing food sometimes? . . . Where do we live now?" It's hysterical but deeply sad too. I imagine that being inside that dog's head captures a little of what it's like to be Ms. Brosh.

Ms. Brosh's stories, many drawn from her childhood, are madcap with a strong tragic undertow. She has had more than her fair share of tragedy (whatever you may think a fair share is). One story concerns the suicide of her little sister, who drove her car in front of a train. (The book is dedicated to her.)

Another tale, "The Ultimate Plan," follows what appears to be Ms. Brosh's own attempted suicide. She takes a pile of drugs, watches scary movies and gets lost outdoors at night. While hallucinating, she says, "I started to feel bad for myself in the same way I felt bad for that mouse from freshman biology" waiting to be eaten by the snake: "*That poor little thing . . . That poor little thing can't handle much more of this . . .*" Hiding under a plant, she thinks "*Oh goodness . . . Somebody should help you,*" and then realizes that her only lifeboat is her cellphone, with which she must somehow communicate: "I felt most simpatico toward the map icon, so I went for it." When the map doesn't help, she recalls other things phones can do. "Call a friend! Write a note! . . . Be a Sudoku puzzle! . . . Summon a car with a stranger in it."

I'm sorry to say that this terribly sad story made me laugh out loud. But in my defense, Ms. Brosh does find her way home. And her picture tells me she was wearing a seatbelt!

—Ms. Boxer's books include "In the Floyd Archives" and "Mother May I? A Post-Floydian Folly."