



## First Year Healthy

*Michael DeForge*

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**First Year Healthy** Michael DeForge

**A mysterious, unsettling parable from one of North America's most popular cartoonists**

*First Year Healthy* purports to be the story of a young woman, recently released from the hospital after an outburst, and her burgeoning relationship with an odd, perhaps criminal Turkish immigrant. In a scant forty-five pages, working with a vibrant, otherworldly palette of magentas, yellows, and grays, Michael DeForge brings to life a world whose shifting realities are as treacherous as the thin ice its narrator walks on. *First Year Healthy* is all it appears to be and more: a parable about mental illness, a folktale about magical cats, and a bizarre, compelling story about relationships.

DeForge's singular voice and vision have, in a few short years, rocketed his work to the apex of the contemporary comics canon. *Ant Colony* was his first book with Drawn & Quarterly: It appeared on *The New York Times* Graphic Bestseller List and was lauded by the *Chicago Tribune*, *The Globe and Mail*, and *Harper's Magazine*. His effortless storytelling and eye for striking page design make each page of *First Year Healthy* a fascinating puzzle to be unraveled. *First Year Healthy*, knotty and mysterious, demands to be read and reread.

## First Year Healthy Details

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Author : Michael DeForge

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## From Reader Review First Year Healthy for online ebook

### Liam says

This story is a quick macabre mystery that reminded me a bit of a less devastating version of Paul Hornschemeier's 'Mother, Come Home'. The story flows very well, the cover made me think it was going to be absurd and impersonal, but it was surprisingly serious and sad. I would have liked it to be a bit longer or balanced in pacing, it ends too quickly, abruptly and cryptically for my liking. I think the story in general tinkered too safely on the edge of surreal horror, and I think DeForge should have been bolder with the narrative and kept plummeting on to something more ghastly, because he was clearly capable of it!

---Post-review reflections---

I much prefer DeForge's closely linear narratives (as in this book and 'Big Kids') as opposed to his 'world-building' narratives (as in 'Ant Colony' and 'Sticks Angelica, Folk Hero'). I think DeForge's surreal art style better accentuates moments in moody personal stories, and becomes dull and overused when drawing expansive art worlds. If I had to justify this, I'd say that when everything and everyone is drawn quirky they all become normal-seeming within the fictional world, and therefore the art style itself becomes unnecessary—a similar argument people including myself raise when criticizing Spiegelman's *Maus* characters as not a great plot device given that it did not affect the reactions within or between characters in the story, and therefore potentially detracts value by limiting the realism and facial expression details which could elevate the impact of such a realistic and emotionally-charged narrative.

What is weird is what is misunderstood, and in this way, DeForge's surreal art could be used to illustrate naturally occurring things which are surreal to the reader's understanding, such as the depth and fluidity of sexuality in *Big Kids* and the complexity and rehabilitation of psychiatric conditions in *First Year Healthy*. This could allow him to more directly portray our unease or misunderstanding of a thing rather than by way of representing the thing itself, and if he chose to create more explicit messages in future works, this medium would put him in a very good position for making some seriously thought-provoking and entertaining narratives. For now, I just hope he continues to hone this narrative style because it is already good enough for me!

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### Jonathan says

Imagine that someone broke into your brain while you were sleeping, stole all of your nightmares, and then made it a book. Here you go!

5/5

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### Robin says

An eerie and succinct graphic novel about relationships and mental illness.

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### **Nate D says**

Like a lot of other Michael DeForge of this era, I read this serialized on his blog, which I used to get as emailed updates. It's a Christmas story, and it played all the month of December 2013 or 2014, I think. I realize I've not been exactly keeping up since -- he moved blogs, then discontinued keeping one, and was never really around tumblr. Which leaves his works not as emailed updates but as books, like this one now, which is more what they always deserved to be. A unique story, harshly colored, eclectically designed and inked, and very oddly narrated in with a matter of factness that refuses to acknowledge its own out-thereness. It's definitely DeForge. I should really go read his latest full-length book, *Big Kids*, now.

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### **Tyler says**

(Also) picked this up randomly to read quickly at the library. Went in blind and WOW, the art is so interesting and vibrant I probably wouldn't have cared if the story was shit. The story was great, though, so we'll never really know. I knew it was fiction, but it still, at least at the beginning, felt compellingly realistic. The character felt very honest and true. Men writing female characters is uh... not always... good. This was very good. The narration is perfect: unreliable, unflappably frank. Bizarre, idiosyncratic details are presented as ordinary, almost uneventful, which makes the entire thing a wonderfully disconcerting read. Suddenly one's perception of "ordinary" is called into question! Maybe it's just me. She's crazy, I'm crazy, me and this book bonded. We're buds, now.

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### **MK King says**

I've been reading underground comix since the 80s and DeForge is, in my mind, the most exciting new artist since Josh Bayer. This is my 5th volume by DeForge and all of them, including this one, are consistently great. Highly recommended for readers who like to be challenged by their comix.

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### **David Schaafsma says**

This is, for DeForge, anyway, what seems to be a rather straightforward narrative of a woman with some kind of mental disorder. Now, the history of first person narratives told by crazy people [I use this word "crazy" lightly, intending no offense, since I have worked in psych hospitals and there's some lot of mental health issues in my family, so I am just sort of "owning" this potentially offensive term and related terms like "nuts"] include lots of interesting work, such as, for instance, Catch 22 author Joseph Heller's *Something Happened*, narrated by a person who is increasingly nuts. Apparently Heller wrote it after participating in a graduate English class discussion about unreliable narrators. Who would be among the most unreliable narrators? People with questionable rational capacities, maybe? Heller's story has his anti-hero describe, among other things, a murder he may or may not have committed. Who knows? At what point do you give up trusting the narrator altogether? Heller, always the joker, thought this premise had much dark hilarious promise. Maybe. But it's also frightening and disorienting. And in *First Year Healthy* our narrator may have something in common with Heller's narrator.

Spoilers ahead for this 45 page story, then: In *First Year Healthy*, DeForge's narrator is a young woman who

has had mental health incidents that have led to hospitalizations, though she is out now, and the title tells you: First Year Healthy, but note the Heller anecdote, above. . . is she in fact really healthy? She tells us she is. . . The woman works after release from the hospital at her brothers' fish market, where she meets a Turkish fellow [known hereafter as Turk] who is crashing at a woman's place, the woman giving him free rent in exchange for occasional sex with him. Turk's rent-for-sex woman gets pregnant, has a son, after Turk has moved out.

Our crazy girl then moves in with said Turk, who tells her of a Turkish custom where you put food out in hopes that a Holy Cat will bless your house. Take a look at the cover art, now. Right, there's a crazy Holy Cat right there. But our girl and the Turk don't get around to putting out food for the blessing; the Turk then gets involved with some criminals, and the mother of his child is killed by a wolf. The woman has no immediate family members, but townspeople drop off food at Turk's house, because this is what people do when people die.

Turk and our crazy girl take the baby in, though there's little talk of the baby ever in this story, until now. However, one night, which happens to be Christmas eve, when the Turk is gone, one of his "associates" comes to visit, with a gun, the dude falls asleep waiting for Turk, our girl cuts said associate's throat, and that's about it as far as plot goes. First year "healthy," huh? It's a mental health story involving crime. People at the edge of society, an immigrant and a crazy girl and a criminal. . . oh, and this baby who is going to be raised in this atmosphere. Oh yeah, but this cat! Don't forget the cat! The food had been put out, for the funeral, remember, the Holy Cat eats some of this food, and so the house according to Turkish custom may now be finally blessed! I mean, if you believe that sort of thing, if you see the narrator of Turkish custom as reliable, that is!

So, on closer examination there are a few aspects of the story that are concerning, the cover of the book illustrating two central ones: 1) the baby and 2) the Holy Cat. The Holy Cat eats the food, which might give us some hope this house is now blessed, but it's also now darkly clear that the Turk ain't comin' home and there's a dead man and a baby with a crazy girl in this house.

So what about this baby, whom we see at the center of the face of the Holy Cat on the cover. We hear very little of the babe, who we realize our hero is ill-equipped to take care of. At one point for kicks our girl offers her breast to the baby, just to see what will happen. The girl has never been pregnant, is not nursing. Bizarre? Within the realm of normal? At the very end our girl hero is resting as she claims the cat is taking care of the baby. Blessed, as it may well be. Yikes. First Year Healthy?! Maybe not yet, girl!

First Year Healthy is a great (and troubling but also possibly darkly funny) story of mental illness about a woman who thinks she sees this Holy Cat moving in after the baby's mother is killed (by a wolf? really, narrator?!) and Turk is gone and she has killed a guy. Oh, and don't forget! It is Christmas Eve when she kills the guy, which makes for a kind of cool and darkly ironic comic twist to the story, the baby Jesus and a baby in peril, for sure. A nice little grisly Christmas story for the kiddies! Not!

Sound a little too strange for you? Well, it was just strange enough for me. Kind of surreal noir. I really, really liked it, crazy as it sounds. It has an edge of madness and potential horror, foreboding. . . and a touch of black comedy! But to get back to Heller: What just happened? Did anything happen? Are we still in the hospital, in the mind of the crazy girl? Is there a wolf? Is there a cat? Is she or anyone in this story really "healthy" or blessed?

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## **Robert says**

Some striking imagery here, and while the narrative remains somewhat experimental, it can be easily read in straightforward fashion in one sitting - but you'll likely want to read it again (I read it on a Thursday evening and reread on Friday). To be honest, I've been ambivalent about M. DeForge, or more to the point, the hype surrounding his work. It's really distracting and honestly nothing a young creator like him (he's not yet 30!) should have to deal with. He's clearly a gifted, unusual and original talent, and hopefully one who can keep his head down, stay focused, and ignore those who seek to elevate him to a status that he may not want - or be able - to live up to. (I personally feel Jesse Jacobs is equally as talented and that his books are more fun to read.) In the meantime, if you are a DeForge fan you should totally like this.

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## **Sonic says**

This is extremely bizarre, ... I loved it!

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## **Miss Ryoko says**

I wasn't really blown away by this... it wasn't revolutionary and mind blowing... it felt like it was weird for the sake of being weird. I don't even really know what the story was about, and you get no explanation or look into the main character's mental illness. You're just left guessing. And not that some mystery isn't a good thing - not everything has to have an explanation or reason - but nothing about this book felt mysterious. It just felt like it was trying really hard but fell short.

Not impressed, unfortunately

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## **Martin says**

'First Year Healthy' or 'First Year Healthy?'. This was an odd read, but I enjoyed it, for the story can mean so many things. Excellent drawings too, but a shame this is only such a short story. I would've loved to see a couple more of these short stories collected into the book.

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## **L.A. says**

There's sometimes a fine line between health and illness. This haunting little graphic novel is the story of a woman who tries to resume a normal life after getting out of the hospital (for what, we are not told). Things seem to be going along okay, until suddenly they're not, and then quietly you won't know even. The moment where the narrative slides from reality into fantasy is a subtle one, and it will feel perfectly reasonable to you because you will have been lulled into the narrator's pov by the drawings. Worth reading a few times just to get the full impact.

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**Liz Yerby says**

weirdo genius

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**Asha says**

Too short.

Art=Pretty great

Story=Meh

There was one part of the story that was very concerning. She got a toddler and had it play with her boob. She was not producing milk and she pointed out that the toddler was way too old to be breastfed, making her sound like a pedophile.

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**Richard says**

An inventive and surreal fable, ostensibly about a woman who works at a fish cleaning factory recovering from a breakdown who meets a Turkish guy with a kid and ends up taking care of the child and dealing with her man's shady past. *First Year Healthy* is more of an illustrated short story feel than what I usually think of as a graphic novel. The single page drawings don't really push the story forward but are excellent at amplifying (DeForgeifying?) the text, which is pretty minimal and way more strange and creative than that synopsis. I especially love the design of the holy cat that visits and eventually takes the baby for a ride in to the forest. Even the everyday layouts are interesting - overhead views of the table laid out with food that also randomly has the baby sleeping on it; the inner workings of the fish factory; the holy cat stuffing its face, and trotting off in the twilight snow.

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