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Share Your Smile

Raina's Guide to Telling Your Own Story

Raina Telgemeier

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ABOUT Smile

When I was eleven years old, I fell on my way home from Girl Scouts and knocked out my two front teeth. The dentist was able to put them back in, but they wound up sitting higher in my mouth than before – making me look like a vampire! I had to undergo root canals, headgear, and braces, all to discover that those two front teeth just wouldn't go back to their original places. So, my orthodontist came up with a revolutionary idea: They would extract my two front teeth (again) and use braces to bring the rest of my top teeth closer together to make my smile look (hopefully) normal. It would require years of orthodontic work, some experimental dentistry, and lots of awkward school photos. Oh – did I mention all this was happening during middle school and high school? Fun times!

I've been telling people about what happened to my teeth ever since sixth grade. The story had plenty of strange twists and turns, and I found myself saying, "Wait, it gets worse!" a lot. Eventually, I realized I really needed to get it all down on paper. I had been writing short-story comics for several years, and my tooth tale seemed like a good candidate for a longer narrative comic.

As I wrote and drew the story, I was able to look back and actually laugh at some of my more painful experiences. What I went through with my teeth wasn't fun, but I lived to tell the tale and came out of it a stronger person. The process of creating *Smile* was therapeutic for me, and put me in touch with many kindred spirits.

I hope my story helps inspire you to share yours! Keep reading if you'd like to know how I created *Smile* before trying your hand at telling your own story!

Because I started working on *Smile* as a personal project long before it was published by Scholastic/Graphix, my methods of working were pretty loose, and I did not document every stage of my creative process very well! But the following steps are, essentially, what went into the making of this book.

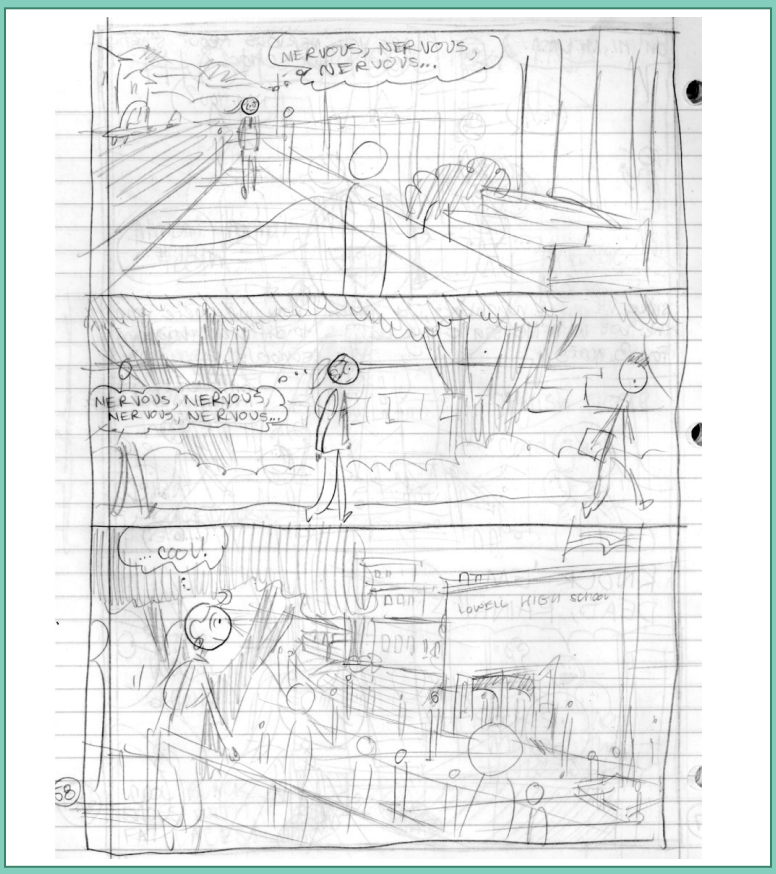
STEP 1: IDEA BUILDING

Smile is based on real events in my life, but almost twenty years passed before I felt ready to commit those memories to paper. A few years before I began writing and drawing pages, I jotted down some of my ideas and memories as a list, just to remind myself of the order in which everything happened. (Most of my books start out with a similarly vague form of brainstorming!) I updated, expanded, and revised this list as I went along, but for the most part, I knew where the story was headed and all the major plot points I wanted to include.

STEP 2: THUMBNAILS

Eventually, I felt ready to dive in and tell my story. The title "Smile" came to me before I began writing or drawing, and it seemed a fittingly ironic title for the awkwardness I knew the story would encompass.

First, I sketched out all the pages as thumbnails in a lined notebook. Thumbnails are the format that I write in – I loosely sketch out both words and pictures in a notebook, to make sure my ideas flow visually. Some cartoonists start with a written, text-only script, but I find it easier to get my thoughts out of my head this way.



STEP 3: PENCILS

On a fresh piece of 9" x 12" Bristol board, I resketched my loose layouts (including the word balloons and dialogue) with a blue colored pencil, then went over those with a mechanical No. 2 pencil to tighten up the artwork. I spend more time at this stage than any other, making sure everything fits into the panels and flows just how I want it to. I do a lot of erasing and redrawing!

STEP 4: PANEL BORDERS, WORD BALLOONS, AND DIALOGUE

Using a 0.8 Pigma Micron pen and a clear gridded plastic ruler, I traced all the panel borders and word balloons in ink, and, using the same pen, added all the dialogue and sound effects by hand. *Smile* is the only comic I've ever lettered by hand – all my other books have been lettered digitally, using a font based on my handwriting. I love the way hand lettering looks, but it was the hardest thing for me to keep neat and steady, and it made my wrist very sore!

STEP 5: INKING

This is my favorite stage of the comic-making process. Almost all my inking is done with a #2 Winsor & Newton Series 7 Kolinsky sable watercolor brush, dipped in black waterproof India ink (my favorite is Dr. Martin's Black Star HiCarb ink). I inked right over my pencil art, essentially tracing the lines I drew in the last step. Brushes are great because you can create both thick and thin lines with the same tool. There are always a few little details on each page that are easier to ink with a pen than a brush, so I save those for last: things like eyeballs, braces on teeth, and buttons on people's shirts.

STEP 6: DIGITIZING

After I finished the inks, I erased all the pencil lines and scanned the pages into the computer. I used the scanner's line art setting at 600 dpi (dots per inch), so I'd have nice crisp line art to work with. I cleaned up all my stray lines in Photoshop, which means that occasionally my original art is a little messier than what you see on the printed page. But not by much!

Back when *Smile* was a black-and-white webcomic, this was my final step! I converted the image to grayscale, sized the page file down to 72 dpi, saved it as a JPEG, and then uploaded it onto the Web, one page per week, for several years. People read the story as I was writing it, and it was really fun to receive feedback from my readers every time I posted something new!

STEP 7: COLOR

I had been creating *Smile* as a webcomic for about three years when Scholastic offered to publish it as a book. At that point, working on