

TRABAJO FIN DE GRADO

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# SÄDE



UNIVERSIDAD  
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FACULTAD DE BELLAS ARTES  
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## ABSTRACT

This is a project memorandum of a final project presented at the faculty of Fine Arts in the University of Málaga, for the academic year of 2021-2022. The project is a graphic novel titled *Säde*, named after the protagonist. *Säde* is a story about loss and letting go, about family and the power of imagination. It is first and foremost a visual journey, led by our young and neurodivergent protagonist who forms an unlikely partnership with a seagull; both searching for their place in a hostile and unstable world.

## RESUMEN en Español

Esta es una memoria del trabajo fin de grado presentado en la Facultad de Bellas Artes de la Universidad de Málaga durante el curso de 2020-2021. El proyecto consiste en una novela gráfica titulada *Säde*, el nombre de su protagonista. *Säde* es una historia sobre la pérdida de un ser querido y el duelo hasta la aceptación, sobre la familia y sobre el poder de la imaginación. Es, antes que nada, un viaje visual, guiado por una protagonista joven y neurodivergente que adquiere una relación inesperada con una gaviota; ambas buscan su lugar en un mundo hostil e inestable.

## **KEYWORDS**

Graphic novel

Diversity

Dystopian

Visual storytelling

## **PALABRAS CLAVE**

Novela gráfica

Diversidad

Distopía

Narrativa visual

## THE BIG “WHYS”

Why a graphic novel. Why this story. I will dive into the nuances of these questions later in the next chapter, but wanted to make a little “foreword” of sorts about it as well.

I chose comic as my medium firstly because it’s simply what I enjoy doing, and hence it is a visual language I have already mastered, allowing me to best bring out what I want to tell. In this case my story is printed out in book format, undoubtedly one of the most functional ways to enjoy a graphic novel. It is something tangible, yet it can be reproduced countless times, making it very accessible.

Now, why I chose to tell this exact story. A story about loss, but also healing, starring a neurodivergent character. First reason, for representation. Based on my personal experience and interests, more often than not in film, comic and literature, neurodivergent and especially autistic protagonists tend to have the plot focus on their abilities and disabilities. Also, it’s common to see only two tropes; one; where the character is a savant, literal genius with a challenging social life, or two; the protagonist is a bullied sensitive individual who has to fight for acceptance. *Såde* in comparison is just a girl, with a few traits that make her way of coping with grief a little special, but still, very relatable. Her feelings just are more on the surface, totally bare.

Second reason: I felt the need to focus on the healing journey of a character as a primarily theme; quite commonly the process of recovering from a loss or a traumatic event is represented rather one sidedly; it either acts as a very aggressive action prompting motive for the protagonist (or the villain), or, it’s something the characters seem to forcibly want to overcome. So, I in turn felt I wanted to produce a work honoring this beautiful but painful, very human experience. In *Såde*, I wanted to showcase a character that doesn’t have the means to “fix the world” or make sense from the grief she’s experiencing, therefore, the book is resolved with acceptance. Acceptance of both the negative feelings, and one’s powerlessness before death.

And lastly, I have personally lost a best friend to tragedy twice in my life. The process of healing and acceptance is slow, but it can also be beautiful and I simply wanted to make a book about this very overlooked but inevitable phase in our lives, giving it time to manifest through *Såde*, a character in which autism is just one more additional trait.

## IDEA

From the very beginning I knew I wanted to work in the area of comics, with a goal of preferably making an entire graphic novel that can later be offered to publishers, as working in comics (both as the writer and artist) is one of my professional interests.

I have always enjoyed working with a narrative, striving to tell a story with my art. Also, being able to provide an experience and talk to a wide audience is one of the main reasons why I picked such an accessible medium as the comic. With drawing being my preferred medium of artistic expression, creating page after page of content for a comic book never felt like an obligation. I also greatly enjoy the process of scripting and world building, and in the case of this project I

developed for the TFG, the universe and basic plot already existed, yet needed a lot of polish. This story of Säde is technically a spin-off of a larger story called Carbon Ground, where Säde will appear 50 in-story-years later as a side character. I've been building this universe for years and I'm hoping to start working on Carbon Ground after Säde's book.

The comic has a primary and a secondary theme: primarily, it's all about the process of healing from trauma (a loss of her mother). I wanted to really just make an entire book about healing, and accepting the inevitable, in a very vulnerable way. Säde is not a superhero nor a character of great power, she can only accept the loss of a loved one and slowly move through the grief, to finally connect with her father again. For this she needs the help of a wandering seagull, also out of place, that will guide her through her sorrow. Her autism is an important factor but it is mostly a trait of the character that provides her with a special kind of mind, giving us an unique insight into her imagination. This also makes her a very vulnerable character; sensitive, honest and innocent, but at the same time incredibly strong. On a secondary level it carries a representation of a dystopian society where the environmental decline has an important role and affects the plot and the characters.

I decided to combine a neurodivergent main character and a fictional dystopian setting for a couple of reasons. Firstly, neurodivergent characters are still rather rare in comics and I feel like we need more diverse representation in main characters. Secondly, stories concentrating on neurodivergent characters are very often set in a realistic scenario be it historical or current day, and often based on real stories of real people.

So, I felt like there was space for a neurodivergent character in a completely made up universe, to maintain a greater sense of wonder in the story. In the end, the

beauty of fictional genres, especially the likes of fantasy and sci-fi, lies in their ability to take us into other worlds and really feed our imaginations. That being especially fitting as one of the themes of the comic is the creative and healing power of imagination.

Also, it's very common for autistic and disabled characters to be represented (especially in mainstream books, film and TV) as either a genius savant, or a struggling outcast. There's endless examples, *Forrest Gump*<sup>1</sup>, *Rain man*<sup>2</sup>, *The good doctor*<sup>3</sup>, *The accountant*<sup>4</sup>... And I'm not saying there's anything inherently wrong in these portrayals, just that they tend to be rather one sided. Hence I felt like there's room for representing a less "flashy" form of neurodivergence.

Another thing common in mainstream media that I wanted to push away from with *Såde* is the focus that is given for healing from trauma/dealing with a loss of a loved one. Rather typically it is used as an external trigger/motive for the character to go either on an epic quest through continents (often seen in fantasy genre) or for a revenge mission to avenge a loved one in one way or another (common in action and superhero genres). Or, at least it has to act as a crucial moment that will alter the character's life forever. A rather rare take (especially in mainstream comics and film) on the topic is to focus on the healing as a journey that will always be incomplete, and just give space for the character to develop through and into it. *Såde* as a book focuses on just that, the way a person has to find their way through grief and loss and the turbulence it causes, to be guided back to the loved ones still present in her life. It's also about the inevitability of death, loss and the passing of time. *Såde* becomes a relatable character because of not just her powerlessness before death, but also life itself. I tried to capture the feeling of being lost, reuniting with another wandering being (the gull), and ultimately finding one's way into accepting what is, has been, and is to come.

Now more about the plot itself: the plot concentrates on the story of a single main character, to make it easier to create one approximately 100-page long solid story with a clear start and an ending. Even so I'm giving a lot of importance to the setting, which in this case is a dystopian, alternative universe to our own, playing with the idea of a post nuclear-war world, developing a distorted culture, infrastructure and society. Great care has been put in the investigation of sociology, allowing me to build a relatively believable universe, showing my rendition of what might happen in the very near future or could have already happened had a few moments in the history gone to a different direction. Hence the distortion of society pushed to extreme could be named as the recurring

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<sup>1</sup> FINERMAN, W., TISCH, S., STARKEY, S. & ZEMECKIS, R. *Forrest Gump*. (1994) United States: Paramount Pictures

<sup>2</sup> JOHNSON, M. & LEVINSON, B. (1988) *Rain man*. United States: MGM/UA Communications. co

<sup>3</sup> FRENCH, R. et al. & SHORE, D. (2017) *The good doctor*. United States: Shore Z Productions, 3AD, EnterMedia, Sony Pictures Television Studios

<sup>4</sup> HOWELL TAYLOR, L., WILLIAMS, M. & O'CONNOR, G. *The accountant*. (2016) United States: Warner Bros. Pictures

“base” theme of sorts, (including questions like the uncontrolled income difference, lack of functional democracy, militarisation etc.) meanwhile the actual plot line revolves around the main character.

The main character, Säde, represents the kind of person that does not fit to the system because of her so called “disorder” (in this case a mild case of autism), but instead of focusing on her difficulties, we focus more on her inner world, in many ways a more rich and vivid view on the world than what the people surrounding her see. The comic is partly mute because the main character prefers to not talk, and I decided not to use a narrator to better maintain a peculiar mood to reflect her silent observational style of living. I personally have a couple friends and family members that manifest traits from the autism spectrum, and that has helped me to respectfully portray the character. I acknowledge it is a risk to go with a non neurotypical main character but in this case I had faith in my abilities to pull it off based on experience and research. I wanted to focus on bringing forward the beautiful in a distinct way of thinking (without forgetting the challenges), and the stark contrast it has with the surrounding world. For structure and a clear representation of time, the comic is divided into “days” that take the reader through a week in the protagonist’s life. It takes a close look on her life and the relationship with a lone seagull, while maintaining the distressed feel of a new and unfriendly world, with environmental, social and infrastructural issues. During this week, Säde forms a partnership with a seagull that will help her process the loss of a family member, while navigating through her daily life. She will seek solace in her imagination on many occasions and towards the end of the story the fantasy and reality will mix constantly, and Säde herself will have to manage her pain and in a way “come back” to the people that care for her. Especially her relationship with her father will transform through the entire plot.

The comic has various layered themes, and I don’t want to highlight any of them above the others, because I believe that it will be up to the reader to decide what is the most important message of the story. The neurodivergent main character and her inner world? Healing from trauma? Family dynamics? The socio economic effects of a dystopian society on citizens? I personally experience the story as a mix of all these elements, and that is its defining trait as well. I am giving this story a freedom to form into whatever it needs to be, for each reader.

The book is directed to any age of reader interested in the aforementioned themes, and I really wrote the story as something that I felt that needed to exist, a story that wanted to be told and might possibly bring something new for comic readers and anyone looking for a visual journey cutting into the lives of some special people, -and a seagull.

## WHY WHAT AND WHEN, ABOUT COMICS AND GRAPHIC NOVELS IN GENERAL

“Comics deal with two fundamental communicating devices: words and images. Admittedly this is an arbitrary separation. But, since in the modern world of communication they are treated as independent disciplines, it seems valid. Actually, they are derivatives of a single origin and in the skillful employment of words and images lies the expressive potential of the medium.”

— **Will Eisner, Comics and Sequential Art**<sup>5</sup>

*Säde* maybe isn't much like the most popular branch of western commercial comics of today (like the classic American superhero comics and other genres that prioritize a single theme and a clear timeline) yet it still respects the general plot structure to keep the slightly messy and dreamlike timeline in order. With general plot structure I'm referring to the sectioning of the plot into exposition, conflict, rising action, climax, falling action, and resolution. I decided to go with a straightforward narrative structure to balance out the slightly experimental touch *Säde* gets from its play with the passing of time and the merging of fantasy and reality. In cases like this the connection of visual communication and literature comes especially clear, the whole soul of a comic lies within its ability to seamlessly join language, storytelling and visual representation, in a way where all are needed for the optimal experience.

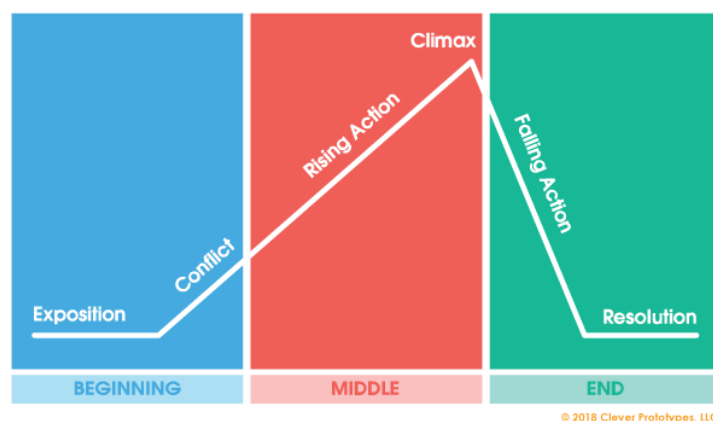


Image of a plot diagram<sup>6</sup>

<sup>5</sup> EISNER, W. (1985) *Comics and sequential art*. (19th ed. pp13) Florida: Poorhouse Press, 2000

<sup>6</sup>Katherine Docimo, Kristy Littlehale. (2022) Plot Diagram and Narrative Art, visited on 9.9.2022

<<https://www.storyboardthat.com/articles/e/plot-diagram>>

Yet, taking into account how comic art and all its variations have evolved during the years it would be foolish to claim *Säde* to be something entirely unique, on the contrary, it merely combines various of the tendencies we've seen the comic go through as a form of art and literature. The comic has come far from its beginnings as a simple strip in a newspaper, and it has branched out as something incredibly versatile. Comic, as a technique of storytelling, can be used to simply tell engaging stories, for entertainment, like during the golden age of American superhero comics, in the 40s. After WWII the superhero genre lost interest and the market got flooded by comics for every topic and theme imaginable.

Then, we got the American underground comix movement, where themes before considered inappropriate took the center stage; these comics were strictly aimed at adults and revolved around "rebellious" themes (to go along with the hippie movement and criticize the more strictly regulated thematics of commercial comics of the time) like drugs and sex. One could claim that was also the birth of radically feminist comics, made by women, that revolved around themes like abortion and were driven by sexually diverse characters. As an example, *Wimmen's comix*<sup>7</sup>, an all female comic anthology featuring artists like Aline Kominsky and Roberta Gregory.

By the 80s comic was already hugely versatile, a good example of the times so called alternative comics is the comic book *Love and Rockets*<sup>8</sup> by Hernandez brothers, which was influenced by both mainstream and underground comics, showing that the two can perfectly merge into a new type of genre. Meanwhile, in Europe the comic had grown on the side and while European comic was in a way "freer" compared to the often all publisher owned American comic also the European market was saturated with whatever was going on in the USA. Around the time of the alternative comics in the states, in France was born a more artistic appreciation of the comic. The publishing house L'Association provided guidelines and direction for new kinds of serious, adult oriented comics that were encouraged to experiment both stylistically and narrative-wise.

Coming to 1986 there's *Maus*<sup>9</sup> by Art Spiegelman, *Watchmen*<sup>10</sup> by Alan Moore and David Gibbons, and *The Dark Knight Returns*<sup>11</sup> by Frank Miller, and hence comics definitively established its presence on the market. As a continuation, by 1992 *Maus* by Art Spiegelman had gotten a Pulitzer prize and finally elevated comics as

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<sup>7</sup> MOODIAN, P. et al, (1972). *Wimmen's comix #1*. San Francisco: Last Grasp

<sup>8</sup> HERNANDEZ, G., HERNANDEZ, J. & HERNANDEZ, M. (1982). *Love and Rockets*. Seattle: Fantagraphics

<sup>9</sup> SPIEGELMAN, A. (1980-1991). *Maus*. New York City: Pantheon Books

<sup>10</sup> MOORE, A. & GIBBONS, D. (1986-1987). *Watchmen*. California: DC Comics

<sup>11</sup> MILLER, F. & ROMITA, J. (1986), *The dark knight returns*. California: DC Comics, 2016

a truly formidable and respectable form of art and literature (with a unique capacity of social criticism) to the knowledge of the common public.<sup>12 13</sup>

Coming to the 00's, there's already a bunch of very playful and experimental comics and graphic novels. Some better known examples without a doubt are *Jimmy Corrigan: The Smartest Kid on Earth*<sup>14</sup> by Chris Ware and *Asterios Polyp*<sup>15</sup> by David Mazzucchelli. The first one being a pioneer in playful use of paneling, using the very base of graphic storytelling as an active part of it, meanwhile *Asterios Polyp* focuses on experimenting with stylistic choices to differentiate between characters and providing narrative information via different lineart and font styles.

All this evolution of comics can be easily seen and appreciated by simply walking into any comic store today. There's an endless supply of different genres, styles and approaches available, and here I've only shortly covered the western comic, as it's closer to what Säde represents as a graphic novel. Asian comics, specifically Japanese manga is a whole another world to discover and I too will mention a few influential works of Japanese artists in the next chapter. Anyway the history of Asian comics is so vastly different from American and European (and in my case hasn't been as influential) that I'm leaving it out of this explanation. As a graphic novel Säde is mostly related to what was the alternative comic, already slightly experimental with visual style, some themes that are not common in mainstream comics (neurodivergent main character in my case), but still playing by most of the "rules" of mainstream comic, including the clear plot structure and a generally attractive visual style.

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<sup>12</sup> PELÁEZ NAVARRETE, C. (2014). *La historieta. Breve recorrido histórico hasta nuestros días*. En Biblioteca de la Universidad de Málaga (2014). *Historias para mirar: cómic y novela gráfica desde la Biblioteca*. Málaga: Universidad de Málaga, Vicerrectorado de Investigación y Transferencia, pp. 3-14. <http://hdl.handle.net/10630/8412>

<sup>13</sup> GARCIA, S. (2010) *La novela Gráfica*. Bilbao: Astiberri ediciones

<sup>14</sup> WARE, C. (2000). *Jimmy Corrigan: The smartest kid on earth*. New York City: Pantheon Books

<sup>15</sup> MAZZUCHELLI, D. (2009). *Asterios Polyp*. New York City: Pantheon Books

## ARTISTS AND COMICS OF INFLUENCE

Firstly I have to mention an amazing learning material, *Framed Ink*<sup>16</sup> by Marcos Mateu-Mestre. This book has given me most of my “technical” information about correct comic-making, aside from simply studying great artists' works. With my experience in producing a couple short stories and a few webtoons I have gained valuable insight into how all this works in practice and most of the technical knowledge is already an automatic part of my workflow, hence I won't be going over all the decisions about composition and paneling/camera use. Also a big part of how I work has already become “mine” alone and there's not a reference to mention for every choice I've made with *Såde*, hence the artists mentioned here are mostly general references that have influenced my personal preference in visual storytelling. In the next chapter I will mention a few additional artists and works where there is a clear correlation between an influential technique and my visual language.

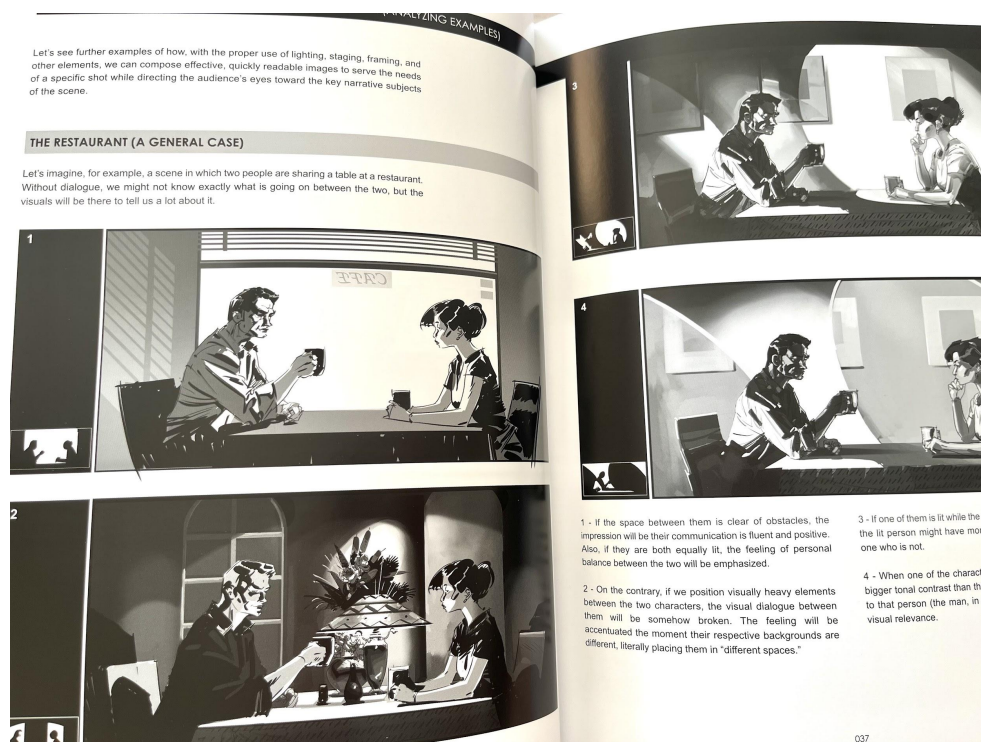


Photo of *Framed Ink* by Marcos Mateu-Mestre, page 37

One big influence has been Moebius' work, even though it might not be obvious looking at my usual style of comic art. Yet, already a long time ago I fell in love with the detailed style and creative use of perspective to enhance the storytelling.

<sup>16</sup> MATEAU-MESTRE, M. (2010). *Framed Ink: Drawing and composition for visual storytellers*. Los Angeles: Design Studio Press

The delicate lineart together with incredibly immersive sceneries sparked my love for a detailed style that does give out maximum amounts of information to the reader. Amongst comic artists some argue this kind of “overloading of information” in a comic is not desirable and the reader's eye should be directed from one key point to another in one fluent motion without causing the reader to get “stuck” in unimportant details, but my personal preference is in the exact opposite and I would argue there is no such thing as an unimportant detail; any element in the background no matter how tiny forms a part of the universe I am telling the story about, hence it has the potential to become a very important detail, or stay as a merely curious one. In any case every single thing in the frame will tell us something about the surrounding world, a character, or both.

In a similar nature, another influential classic I must give credit to is *Akira*<sup>17</sup>, by Katsuhiro Otomo. Incredible control over urban scenes and dynamic panel work are some of the most eye catching features of this comic, and it has without a doubt influenced my work and especially worldbuilding, as it's a prime example of a very far fetched sci fi scenario that's made in a way that it still feels logical and believable within its own fictional dimension.

A third extremely important comic book that I want to mention is *Blacksad*<sup>18</sup> drawn by Juanjo Guarnido and written by Juan Diaz Canales. I'm now focusing on the visual side of the book series. Aside from stunning reduced color palette, and also a very detail oriented visual storytelling, one of the strongest points of the graphic novels must be the wonderful “rhythm” it has. The paneling and flow of each composition leading to another is just wonderful, and provides a very easy and comfortable reading experience. Also it works as a magnificent example of a style that is extremely heavily saturated with details, yet it doesn't lose any of its flow, energy or impact as a visual work of art. Having read *Blacksad* as an adult I really paid attention to the skillful storytelling and also studied it to a degree, with the making of *Säde* in mind.

Last but not least of the most influential comics, I'm dedicating time to mention a hugely impactful work of art, *Perramus*<sup>19</sup>, a masterful graphic novel that is also historically important, written by Juan Sasturain and drawn by Alberto Breccia. The work is very political and makes a strong sociocultural point, hence being of great inspiration for me. It also has amazing mastery of monotone coloring, with panels that seem to float on the white base, something that I later adopted to the visual image of *Säde*. The rhythm and overall mood is almost dreamlike, just carrying the reader around in the world that is at the same time very rooted in reality but also almost mysterious. It is one of the special graphic novels that doesn't just tell a story, it *becomes* a story, something that completely captivates the reader.

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<sup>17</sup> OTOMO, K. (1982). *Akira*. Oregon: Dark Horse Comics, 2000

<sup>18</sup> CANALES, J. & GUARNIDO, J. (2000). *Blacksad*. Oregon: Dark Horse Comics, 2010

<sup>19</sup> SASTURAIN, J. & BRECCIA, A. (1985). *Perramus*. Barcelona: 001 Ediciones, 2015

When talking about works that have had the most influence in the birth of this project I must venture out of the comic book format, and move over to animation. The two share a lot of the same rules in terms of how to depict movement, create mood, control time... the use of the “camera” works very much the same in comics as in animation. In the end, storyboards are essentially comics without variation in panel size and structure. As for influential works I must highlight Studio Ghibli's work and the effect especially Miyazaki's films have had in my storytelling. It's been mostly subconscious and I've only later on noticed that in my work I tend to gravitate towards a similar sense of wonder that so well transmits from films like *Spirited Away*<sup>20</sup>, yet with a tangible feel of a real world and society, like in *The Wind Rises*<sup>21</sup> and *When Marnie Was There*<sup>2223</sup>. Now, it's worth mentioning that a vast majority of Miyazaki's and Studio Ghibli's work function by the rules of so called soft world building, where the creator doesn't explain and justify, but merely immerses the reader/viewer in a world where the story will gradually let them figure out how everything works, to the necessary degree of enjoying the story. These stories are character driven and immerse the reader/viewer without the need for excessive facts.

To offer an example of hard worldbuilding it's best to mention *The Lord of the Rings*<sup>24</sup>, by J.R.R Tolkien. This kind of fictional works are based on transparency and consistency, specific rules and details to create believability and immersion. Now, my personal opinion and preference when it comes to my own works, is that soft world building works best for so called “one book” projects. Stories that are character driven (by only a few main characters), and are of a more limited length. On the contrary, a comic series with a lot of characters, multiple books and a continuous plot, hard worldbuilding usually gives us the opportunity to reach a high level of realism and then keep providing the reader with new information about the universe. Also, it helps to maintain a structure in a story with multiple important characters and possibly intertwining storylines. Coming back to *Säde*, the book is clearly based on soft world building, with a character driven plot, and all necessary information about the world is gained throughout the story.

Another interesting point about Miyazaki's work are the female leads. As probably his most famous and internet circulating, yet impossible to trace quote goes; *“Many of my movies have strong female leads- brave, self-sufficient girls that don't think twice about fighting for what they believe with all their heart. They'll need a friend, or a supporter, but never a savior. Any woman is just as capable of*

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<sup>20</sup> SUZUKI, M. & MIYAZAKI, H. (2001) *Spirited away*. Japan: Studio Ghibli

<sup>21</sup> SUZUKI, T. & MIYAZAKI, H. (2013) *The wind rises*. Japan: Studio Ghibli

<sup>22</sup> NISHIMURA, Y. & YONEBAYASHI, H. (2014) *When Marnie was there*. Japan: Studio Ghibli

<sup>23</sup> For clarification, this film is not by Miyazaki even though I mentioned it straight after his films, for it's very similar nature.

<sup>24</sup> TOLKIEN, J.R.R. (1954) *The Lord of the rings: The Fellowship of the ring*. (ed. unknown) New York, Ballantine Books. 2018

*being a hero as any man.*"<sup>25</sup> Has this quote truly been said by Miyazaki or not, we can see it in action in his films, clearly contrasting against the delicate Disney princesses of the Golden age of Walt Disney's animations. This unconventionality was new at the time Miyazaki's films got popular in the west, giving him and his films a very specific status as a filmmaker.

His way of "freeing" young female characters in mainstream film and animation has been extraordinary and inspiring, and it is worth mentioning that via the influence of John Lasseter (the US executive producer of Miyazaki's films like *Ponyo*<sup>26</sup> and *Spirited away*) in Pixar and Disney, Miyazaki's style to build female characters seeped into western animation as well. Slowly and surely the trend started to change, which we can now see in films like *Encanto*<sup>27</sup> and *Turning Red*<sup>28</sup>.

I admit the influence these films had in me feeling the urge to give the lead to an unconventional and young female character. Also, worth mentioning is a very recurring theme in his films; the environment and borderline natural catastrophes. Human effect on natural habitats. I personally always felt very connected to this kind of theme, so I suppose it was no surprise my first long graphic novel would also carry a pretty important environmental message as a little side theme. I suppose my love of "politically green" films started very early as a child after seeing the animation *FernGully: The Last Rainforest*<sup>29</sup>.

To mention a specific film from Studio Ghibli, this time by Isao Takahata, *The Tale of Princess Kaguya*<sup>30</sup> is an important influence for a couple of reasons. Firstly, it focuses on a strong yet simplified visual style, a main character with a signature shape language and movement to transmit a whole lot of emotions. Secondly, it's a great example of a story based on a very simple tale, yet it's by the visual impact and storytelling techniques that this simple story becomes a captivating experience with multiple themes and layers.

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<sup>25</sup> Attributed to an interview Miyazaki gave to The Guardian in 2013, but the source material has been deleted or can't be found; yet it's one of the most circulated phrases for when it comes to Miyazaki's films

<sup>26</sup> SUZUKI, T. & MIYAZAKI, H. (2008) *Ponyo*. Japan: Studio Ghibli

<sup>27</sup> MERINO, Y., SPENCER, C. & BUSH, J., HOWARD, B. (2021) *Encanto*. United States: Walt Disney Animation Studios

<sup>28</sup> COLLINS, L. & SHI, D. (2022) *Turning Red*. United States: Walt Disney Animation Studios.

<sup>29</sup> FAIMAN, P. & KROYER, B. (1992) *FernGully*. Australia, United States: 20th Century Fox

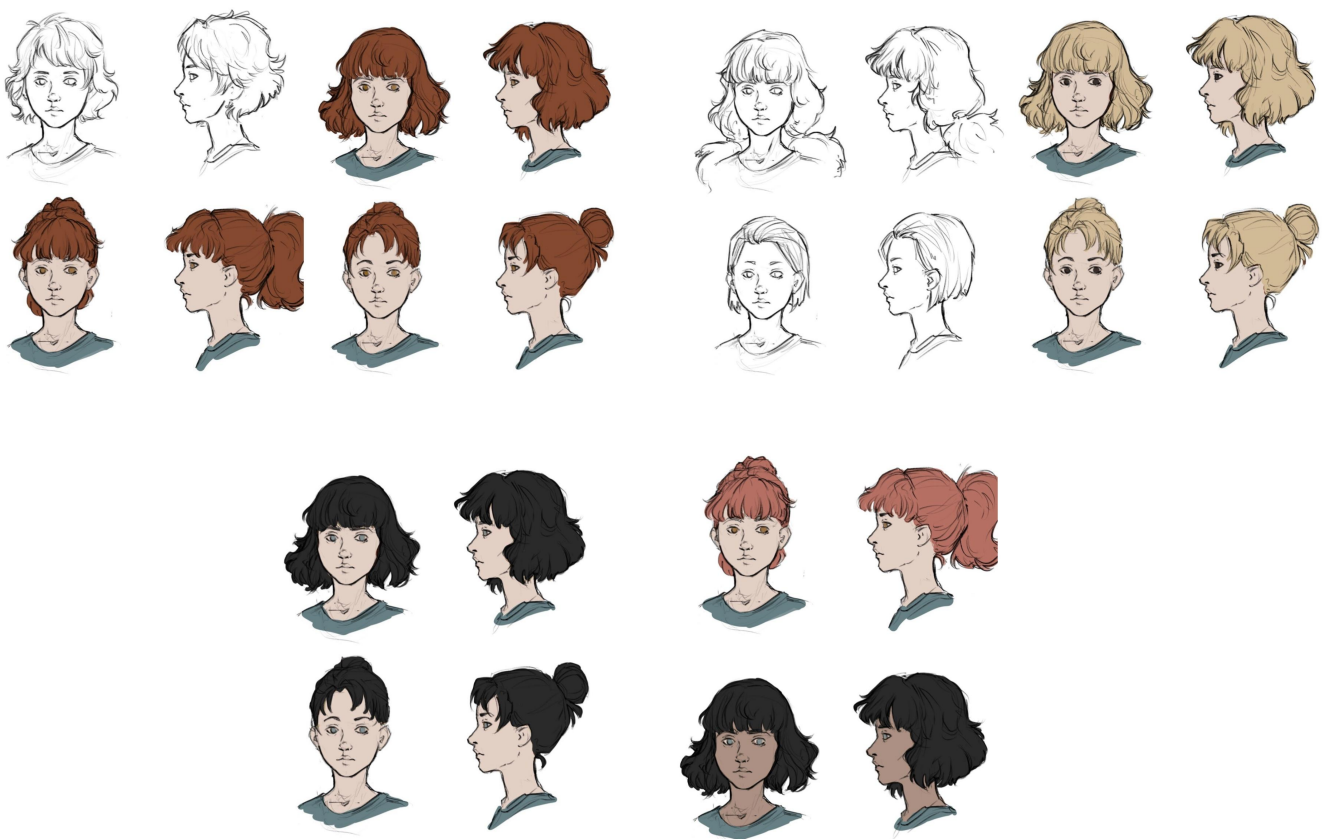
<sup>30</sup> NISHIMURA, Y. & TAKAHATA, I. (2013) *The tale of princess Kaguya*. Japan: Studio Ghibli

## PRODUCTION PROCESS

My goal was to produce a graphic novel well suited for printing, a classic means of distribution. I also picked a horizontal format for the book, to be able to take advantage of horizontal full pages and really panoramic spreads, as they fit the mood and ample environment shots of the comic.

I decided to work on the Procreate app on my iPad Pro, mostly because it's a thoroughly portable device. I personally am a little more versed in Photoshop, and programs like ClipStudio offer very good comic specific tools, but as I was still having classes and spending long periods at the faculty I wanted to be able to work on the comic no matter where I was, without depending on a workstation. The screen is just big enough to work on a comic like this comfortably, as it provides me with a pretty accurate view of the final paper size of the comic as well.

## CHARACTER DESIGN



Character design studies

I was looking for a juvenile design with characteristic hair that would help convey her emotions that are often not very visible on her face. In the end I went with a slightly darker skin tone and an ethnic nose type simply for representation, as it's a statistical fact that main characters tend to be white in a huge majority of comics. After all, in my universe every ethnicity is represented and "possible" from a plot point view, so why not have the main character represent some other than the white European ethnicity.

## PICKING A FORMAT AND MAKING THE FIRST DRAFT

The graphic novel *La casa*<sup>31</sup> by Paco Roca is definitely what gave me the idea for a horizontal format. I'd also like to see *Såde* printed in rather large size so the horizontal format feels especially nice and a fun way to present the story. I also planned for a slow rhythm and plenty of "breathing room" between some panels and the horizontal format really allowed for a more flowing and visually interesting storytelling.

Usually at this point one would make a clean written script of the plot, with all the dialogue and descriptions of places. Yet as I'm working on this by myself I had the freedom to go a little more unofficial route for this phase. My "script" ended up being a bunch of very chaotic notes in a notebook, which in this case was just enough. I had the plot very clear in my head and after making the loose script I quickly moved on to drafting the first sketch version of the entire comic. I wanted to be able to "read" through the whole story in a messy form before starting to work on the lineart etc. This phase didn't take too long and it was a wonderful way to flesh out the entire book that at least I could read through and assess its clarity and readability.

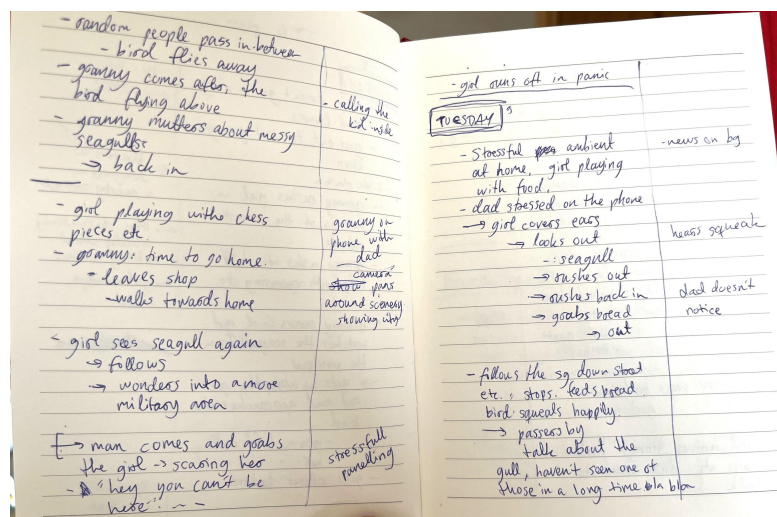


Photo of my "script": descriptions and dialogue to help me remember the core of the story, with some notes about camera angles/movement on the right

<sup>31</sup>ROCA, P. (2015). *La Casa*. (5th ed.) Bilbao: Astiberri Ediciones



Examples of two of my sketch pages

At this point I could confirm the story would reach the length of approximately 100 pages, and I'd also know which pages were on the left or right side of the book to help me plan spreads and narratively important page groups. Also, I was now able to walk other people through the whole story, letting them follow the visual narrative (even if it was a little messy still) while I was telling them about important dialogue and clarifying some events. I was able to do this without an actual script only because the story is very light on dialogue, as Såde doesn't really talk with people and most of the story is told visually.

Link to the file with the complete story in sketch form:

[https://docs.google.com/document/d/12Fvz\\_BHd5MxO9QPmbDKhdB9vk9efTXZsBt-U6wxCuec/edit](https://docs.google.com/document/d/12Fvz_BHd5MxO9QPmbDKhdB9vk9efTXZsBt-U6wxCuec/edit)

## FIGURING OUT THE NAME OF THE BOOK & REINVENTING THE NAME OF THE MAIN CHARACTER

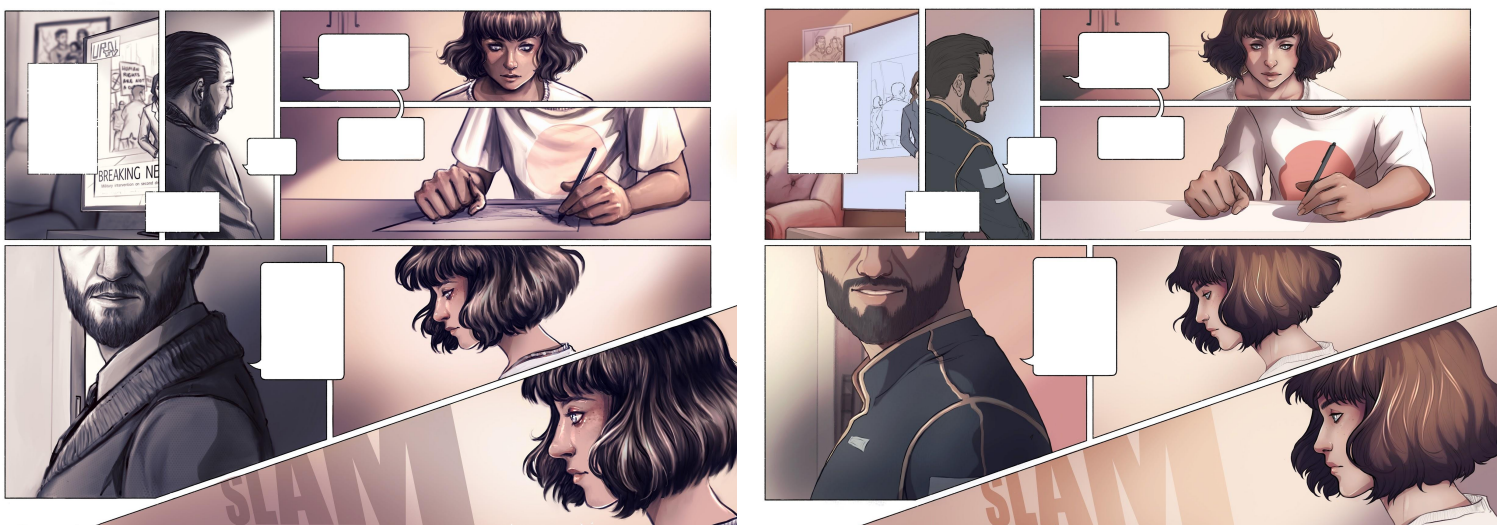
While I was inking the pages and making style tests, I started thinking about the name of the book. I had been calling it "Beaks and Pieces" as its work name, but it simply wasn't a title fit for the book. It's long, but not telling enough, nor is it catchy in any way. Coming up with a good title was horribly difficult, especially as there already exists such an insane amount of literary and cinematic works in the world, that most of the titles I came up with were already taken by Korean drama shows or super popular fanfics.

My title "issue" got me into thinking about how easy it would be to just name the book after the main character. And how very very fitting that would be! After all, the storyline is entirely about her, and if any graphic novel should be named after its protagonist, it's this. That got me rethinking the character's name. Alice was a sort of a "work name" that simply stuck. The name is a clear reference to Lewis Carroll's Alice in Wonderland, and I considered it a rather fitting choice. Yet with making it the title of the book, I'd have to come up with something more original...

After a while spent researching the internet, I went on to Finnish, nature related names. That being my mother language I could assess the meaning, the sound and the look of the name. Luckily, the society in my book is already so "mixed" culture wise that names from different languages/cultures are pretty freely used. My personal favorite was the name Säde, which directly translates to "a ray of light". I find that very suitable for our main character in many ways. The name also sounds and looks pleasant, plus the ä adds a nice little visual touch to it, thinking about the title and the typography of the cover art. Säde is also a good title and a name because (for what I know) it doesn't mean anything offensive in any major language, and there's only a few books titled Säde, both with very little reach, by Finnish and Estonian authors.

## VISUAL DEVELOPMENT: Stylistic choices

Quite in the beginning I had to tackle the style question, and that turned out to be more troublesome than I expected. My first try ended up being way too messy for a possibly a4 size, just not good at all. I decided I wanted something extremely beautiful and clean instead of painterly (in this case messy because I wasn't technically good enough). Also painting the architecture might have been very complicated and time consuming. My initial reasoning for the painterly style was to avoid the process of having to lay down flat colors, hence speeding up the work, but in the end I worked around this problem too.

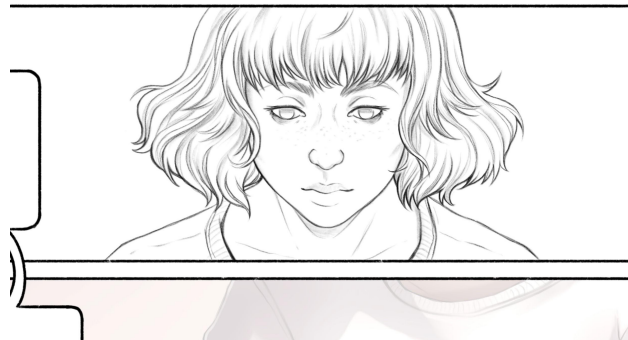


First and second style tests with the first page of the comic. The first one was of very strong contrast and a rather messy outlook, while in the next one I went to the opposite extreme with very neat lines and color work.

The next round was made with a more cell-shading like look, giving it a cleaner look. I ended up working the panels a lot though, and the lineart got lost in the very refined color work. I tried to fix this with strengthening the lineart, but that resulted in a very plastic-like cartoony look, which in itself was of good quality, but not the style I wanted for the comic. I felt like I needed something more organic, harmonious and soft.

I ended up redrawing everything from the start despite liking the lineart in the previous try, because I felt like I needed something more textured and a little thicker, yet still delicate. I dug through my brush library and found the one I used for the last iteration. Now I gave more weight to the lineart and shaded it with some touches with the same brush just in bigger size and low opacity, to shade straight into the lineart, resulting in a very attractive drawing even without color. Then came the hard part of putting the color without overriding the lineart. I had

to accept that now the lineart is the king and I should stick to a way more simplified coloring style.



Lineart test

I also changed the character's hair and skin color, because the initial dark hair/middle tone skin created many problems, starting with the hair mass losing volume without a lot of work in bringing out the lights, and that is naturally time consuming and compromises the stylistic choices. The slightly lighter/warmer hair color allows me to bring its movement out more with the lineart only, and it was nice to create more harmony in the character with the lesser contrast between skin and hair. In the end that suits both the ambient of the comic and the character.



Getting closer to the final style. The lineart is more prominent (and more lively), but still in balance with the color. The overall image is clear but less simplified than the last iteration, with a bit more organic look.

I also very slightly tweaked her proportions in the last version because with all the redraws I had begun to slip to drawing a more mature looking character. In the end I want her to look clearly under 15 years old. Also a problem in her facial features arised, the nose. Wanting to respect her ethnicity and the common nose type, I lost the button nosed option, which would have naturally made the character younger looking, while the roman nose does the opposite. I decided to keep it anyway and compensate with her child-like gestures and the gangly body type.

This style prevailed for the first 8 pages that I presented for a Beca de Creación, by la fundación El Arte De Volar, el grupo Edelvives and the Norma Editorial. After that, I had a long break not working on the comic due to finishing other classes and working as a freelance illustrator and concept artist. When I returned to the comic in september of 2021, I indulged in one more style test, just to make sure I would be happy with the style selected for the rest of the pages.



A scrapped test

I went for a more rendered look with softer color gradation and finer lineart. I also made a few changes to the character design, including a more ethnic nose and a darker skin tone. The darker skin needed a more saturated hair color for contrast, so I went with the more orange color. Yet, in the end this style was far from functional, I sacrificed the readability and contrast for the "finer" look, and then decided to scrap the whole change and leave the first 8 pages untouched, and just continue inking the story forwards. I did keep the more ethnic nose because I think it suits her personality and the look I was after.

After the last experiment, I kept working on the inking, with a very slight variation to the lineart compared to the first 8 pages. I switched to a more ink-like and opaque brush, to obtain a more solid stroke that'd save me some time while inking. I preferred the more sketch-like look of the former lineart but that required me to go over the lines a few times to achieve a desired level of contrast, whereas now with the more ink-like look I only have to go over the drawing once. I still kept the softer lined look for the backgrounds, as those will be basically painted over anyway when I move on to colors.



Here is an example of the inking, now providing a clean outline for the character, guaranteeing readability and allowing my coloring style to look at its best. The lineart pages are not as "pretty" as they could be in this state simply because I avoid using flat blacks in my lineart/art. It is a common style especially in american comics to have strong prominent blacks laid in in the inking phase, (also making the pages look very finished already in the black and white phase) but out of personal taste I do not want that for my comic, and I strictly think about how the finished product will look like with color, not how the inked page will look like in itself.

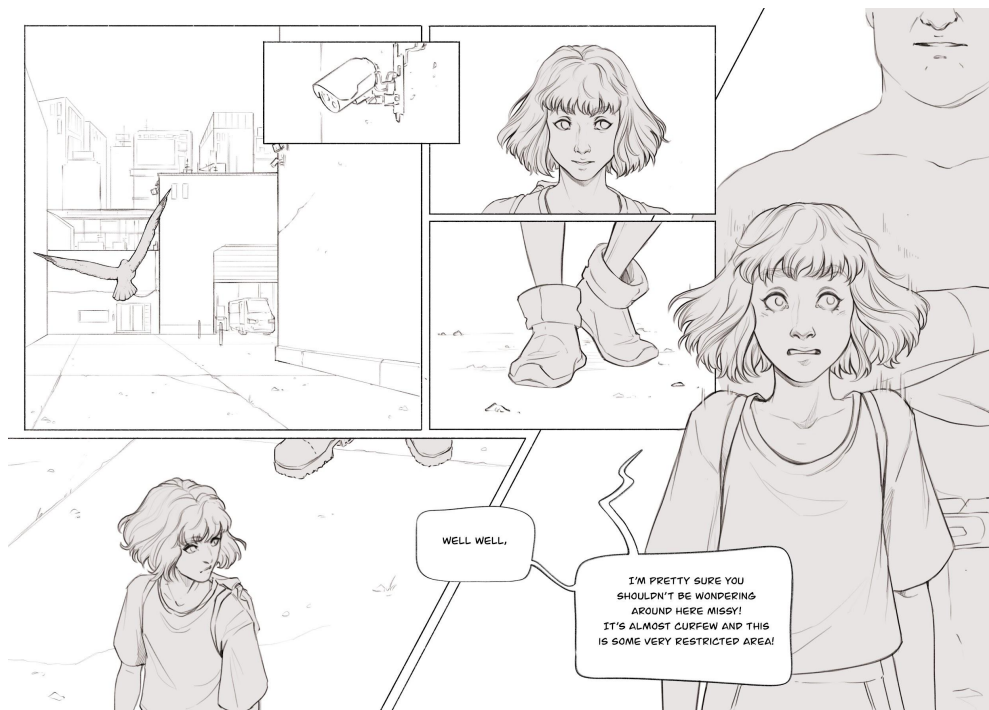
Now, the last style change.

It's spring of 2022.

As ridiculous as it might seem I ended up making some last adjustments to the style that will also support the narrative in the long run. Firstly, I simply wanted a *better* lineart, just, prettier. The Problem with that is that it's slow, so I thought about compromising the full color look. Now this was a total lightbulb moment for me as I realized leaving a major part of the comic monotone would allow me

to color in the imaginary parts of the story, hence perfectly separating the two levels of realities Sade experiences. This way I could be sure the reader would know when she's aware of the real world and when she's in her own bubble of happiness instead. Also now most of the production time would go into the lineart and the coloring, more like toning, would be really fast to do. It's worth mentioning that I decided to keep the gull with a hint of color at all times during the story, simply because it is a literal ray of light for her, bringing some of the peace from her imagination to the real world.

Here, one page with only the lineart, it's clearly more flowing, dynamic, and delicate than the previous iterations. I've also decided to not let even one expression slip past before it's polished enough for me to like it even when I look at it a few days later.



Final lineart style. At the same time it's very clean and "pretty" while maintaining good movement and expression.

Next is an example of a finished page with its monotone look. I went for a sepia tone because it gives the page a little softer feel compared to a black and white approach. You can also see how the gull is colored thanks to the beak and the legs. I also decided to remove the black outlines both from the speech bubbles and the panels, to achieve a softer, less contrasted look.



Final look of the comic

Here it's worth mentioning that the visual style of *Perramus* affected me in my decision to take away the outlines of the panels. It somehow helped to bring all focus on the actual forms and shapes within the panels, while making the pages overall look more solid and clear. The black outlines made the pages look messy when I moved from the lineart to the colored version.



PERRAMUS BOOK IV

320



A few cropped panels from *Perramus* book IV page 320 on the left for comparison

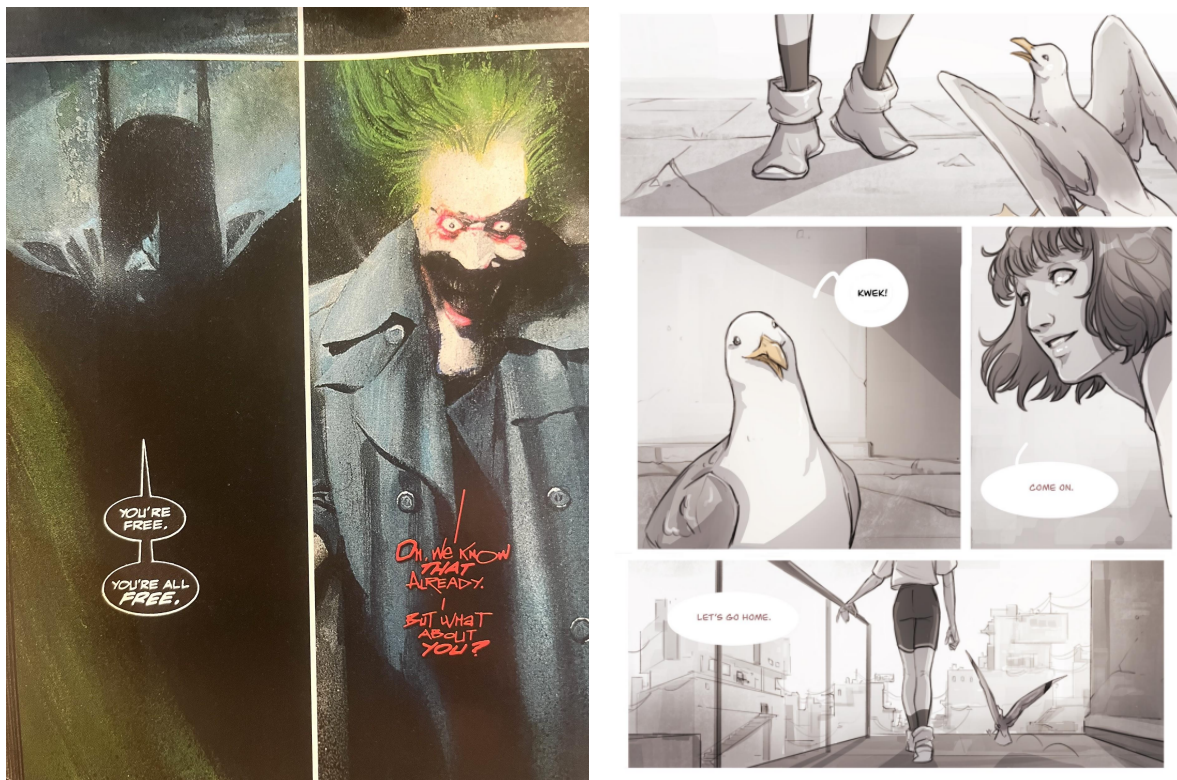
It was at this time that I made the final decisions about the character design, considering color, especially.



A fully colored page from the latter half of the comic where Säde is more prone to getting swallowed by her imagination (coping mechanism).

I kept the slightly darker skin tone, but the hair went from slightly red to very strong orange red hue, for the lovely color pop it would give and how it would highlight her hair shape making it her most unique feature, hence making her easily recognisable despite the otherwise very plain design. A red haired protagonist is sort of a cliché at this point and I was trying to avoid it but her design simply ended up begging for it. It helped both in clarifying the shape language and in color coding her in the best and most functional way possible.

Another visual technique that is rather directly referenced is the use of different fonts and font colors to differentiate between characters. Commonly used, for example in *Arkham Asylum*<sup>32</sup> by Grant Morrison and Dave McKean. I'm using a similar kind of technique to highlight Säde's relation to loud noises and her own voice. As we see she's not talking much, and strong sounds seem to bother her. Hence, I'm using the same kind of pink tones both in the sound effects that cause sensory overload and as the color of her own voice, because it simply rings a little too differently to be comfortable in her head (something that I have directly been told by an autistic person as a description of their relationship with sound). Small details that hopefully end up enriching the created universe.



Here are a few panels from *Arkham Asylum* and *Säde*, using the same technique, but in *Säde* it is obviously way more subtle

<sup>32</sup> MORRISON, G. & McKean, D. (1989). *Arkham asylum, 30th Anniversary edition*. (3rd ed.) California, DC Comics 2020

## RHYTHM AND PACING

I wanted *Såde* to feel a little slow in the beginning, like waves splashing idly on a beach, repeatedly, monotonously. I wanted structure; in the days, in her routine, in the endless stairs of the city. With this I give time for the “nothing” to happen, yet I still provide the reader with all sorts of bits of information. A lot of time of the story is dedicated to moving from one point to another, across the city. Which, of course, has informational and metaphorical value but it’s also an important technique for me to “slow down time” for the reader. That way the overall mood will remain calm and slow except for the very spots I want to be erratic and busy.

So, a perfect influential comic (a manga in fact) to mention at this point is *The Walking Man*<sup>33</sup> by Jiro Taniguchi. The work has been compared to poetry and it indeed has a very special mood to it, and even though with *Såde* I’m not after the exact same effect, I too try to play with the mood of idle exploration and wonder, appreciation of the most mundane things.



29



Comparison of a page from *The Walking Man* and half a page of *Såde*. There are clear similarities in the use of environmental shots and angles to create time and mood in a page

<sup>33</sup> TANIGUCHI, J. (1992) *The walking man*. Rasquera: Ponent Mon 2006

To reinforce the mood of the storyline, I use steady, rectangular panels when everything is alright with our protagonist, and then switch to erratic, more angular paneling to represent distress.



An example of a panel where our protagonist is upset

I put a very conscious effort into choosing the best camera movements and compositions to transmit whatever I wanted to with my pages and I think the overall result is more or less functional. Here below is another “stressful” situation for Säde but in comparison with the “real-life” panic this situation is happening somewhere more in her imagination, hence the softer panel structure



The pacing and correct rhythm was especially important for the ending, as it is of absolute priority to transmit it right. So, I took my time to think it through and just paid attention to not rushing anything, on the contrary I tried to let it flow slowly, and with a certain melancholy.

As I got closer to the ending of the storyline, and hence the ending of the entire project, I exported my files and moved them all into Clip Studio Paint to be able to see the book as spreads, giving me all the info needed to make final adjustments to the structure of the panels and even pages. I also previewed the book in 3d with a very handy tool in CSP. All this helped me prepare for printing and allowed me to be confident in how the product will look after moving it from the digital dimension to the physical one.



The view of my pages lined up all in the same window so that I can have an idea about how the pages will work together, and

Link to a video of the 3D preview:

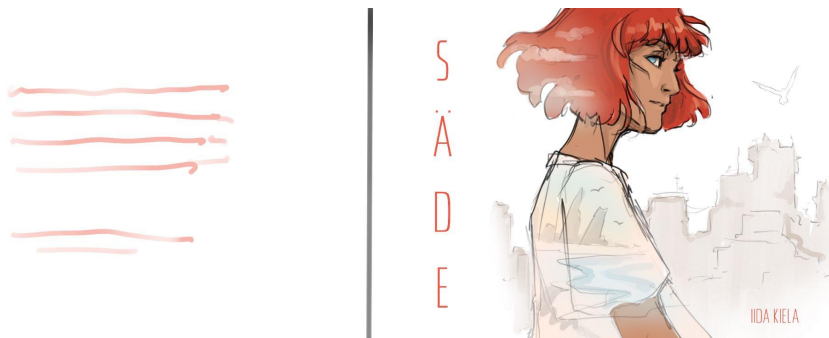
<https://youtu.be/pTQh4acG9eg>

## REVIEWING THE WRITING

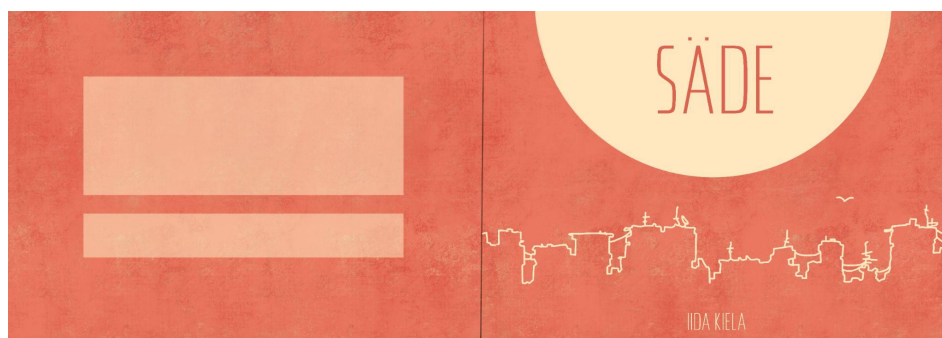
Lastly, I asked my good friend and an author, Dylan Andresen (who happens to be American), to review and possibly fix my English. While I have a full working proficiency in the English language, I am not native, hence there might be nuances I'm not getting absolutely right in my writing. The help of someone native proved invaluable and we fixed quite a few bits of dialogue to sound more organic, without changing the intention of my original script of course.

## COVER ART

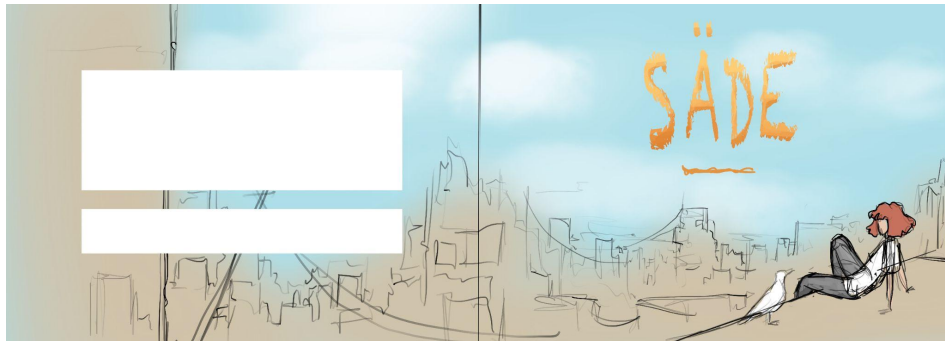
Making of the cover was of course a project of its own. I had a few ideas for it but quickly chose my favorite of the three sketches (number 1) and started developing it. Sketch 1 is simple but has a strong and very eye-catching composition. Sketch 2 was beautifully simplified and captured the essence of the book. Sketch 3 was adorable and straightforward, giving the reader a clear idea of the story, yet it's a little naïve.



sketch 1



sketch 2



sketch 3

I felt instantly connected to the first sketch, the white background combined with a simple but strong character illustration just felt right, it is a technically pleasing and correct cover but also just fits the visual language of the comic as a whole. Plus, the high contrast makes it really pop, which is only a positive thing considering it might someday be on a book store shelf with a dozen other amazing covers. Anyhow, the first iteration went a bit wrong in the beginning, as Säde seemed quite a bit older than the 13-15 she's supposed to be.



First iteration of the cover, she looks way too old

I made a bunch of corrections, starting with the proportions of her face; bigger and rounder eyes, softer cheeks and jaw (very subtly), less red lips, softer smile, a bit more neutral pose... All this reduced the dramatic and “adult” mood of the first comic, giving us a little more innocent feel for the second iteration. After feedback I also changed the seaside view that’s showing through her silhouette, the stone structures were simply too sharp and aggressive looking for our purposes.



Final iteration of the cover

All the adjustments did work well in the end, and I managed to fine tune the cover into its final form. The back cover on the other hand was left totally blank aside from a little introductory text, which I wanted to be more like a poem than actual informational piece of text. And I feel like I succeeded.

A story about a girl and a seagull.

About loss, grief and family.

And all things imaginable.

Back cover text

## PRINTING THE BOOK

The printing process worked out relatively smoothly. I contacted the printing house, Altagrafics in Málaga, to discuss the first details via email, and then went to their shop to take a few test prints in order to pick the best paper type. The final choice was between two types of whites, and the only thing making the choice complicated was the fact that around 70% of the comic is sepia tones, and the last 30% either half color or full color. And, most of the colored pages have water in them, which is of blue and turquoise hues. Here came the color accuracy issue that the more yellow-ish paper made the blues a bit too green and Såde's skin tone lost its pink hue a bit... So, meanwhile the sepia toned pages looked more beautiful with the warmer paper, the colored ones fared better on the bright white one. The print quality was very good though, their Canon CMYK inkjet printer did a beautiful job with the color, I detected absolutely no deviation from the digital version, aside from what was caused by the paper's tone. After careful consideration I decided to go with the bright white paper, it will fit the cover beautifully and bring the maximum amount of light to the artwork. According to my initial plans, the book was printed in A4 size, to give it a good visual presence.



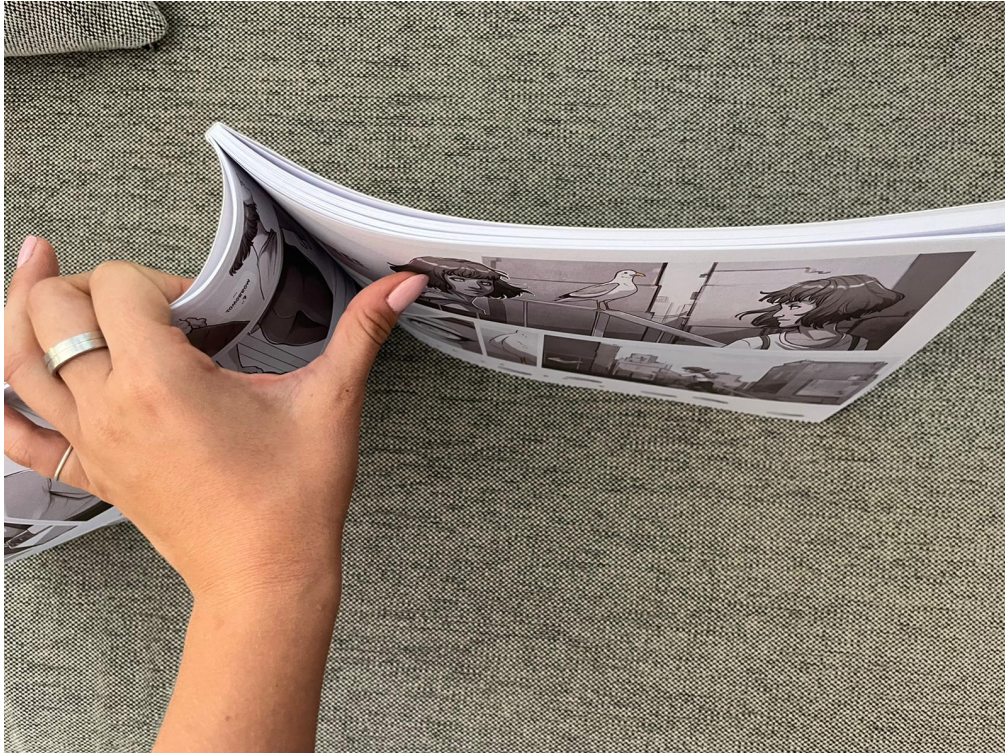
Photo of the print tests

A week later I got the finished print, and it did fulfill my expectations relatively well. For a truly commercial product I'd like some improvement in paper quality but this was the thickest print quality paper they got and it is sufficient to present my book beautifully. The chosen soft matte cover fits the aesthetic perfectly as well.



The finished print met my expectations, and aside from being beautiful the matte cover gives it a pleasant feel to touch.

I was very invested in trying to make the product as good as possible to start with, because the work being a graphic novel, its “book form” is its form of presentation, and all details about graphic design to its materials are a part of how the product is perceived. I chose a very simplistic outlook for it at the time I made the cover design, and wanted the whole book to maintain that style. Hence, also the back of the book kept a very stripped feel and there’s nothing “unnecessary” adorning the book on any side or page.



Pictured a top view to show the thickness of the book.

I was a little nervous about the thickness of the book, firstly because a 100 pages doesn't occupy that much space, and secondly, those pages were going to be made of relatively thin paper. Yet, the final product looks and feels very nice, and the feared "thin little pamphlet" scenario did not happen.

Here's a link to a video of me handling the book:

<https://youtu.be/CHy-sh0XqGs>

Overall I'm very pleased with how the book came out, the dimensions are comfortable and reading it was very enjoyable, pages look beautiful and are easy on the eyes to read.



Close up photo of a monotone page. Details were preserved well.



A whole spread in color: the blue tones turned out well and the contrast is good



The full color pages are stunning as well, color accuracy is great and everything is very nice and sharp

## BUDGET

Budgeting the work was relatively straightforward, as in my case almost all the work was done digitally. Hence I only need to cover the initial cost of the hardware and software necessary, and lastly, printing. And, obviously, the tools weren't exclusive for this project alone but I'm using them in my everyday work as well.

Work from home

Electricity and other living bills excluded

### Tools:

Ipad pro 2020	1099€
Apple pencil 2nd gen	135€
Procreate app	9,99€
Clip Studio Paint Ex	49€

### Printing

One print copy, soft cover, A4, 100 pages	46,70€
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**Total: 1339,69€**

## ATTACHMENTS

### LINK TO GRAPHIC NOVEL *SÄDE* DIGITAL PDF FILE:

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/14sX0SXnu9F2I0-bbSgogux5x6DwWwA3-/view?usp=sharing>

### SPECIFICATIONS:

Book of 98 pages not including covers

DIN A4 dimensions

Satin finish ultra white paper 115gr.



## CONCLUSIONS

The process of making this book from start to finish took way longer than I first thought. Then again, me working on the side as a part time illustrator while spending a whole year more on *Säde* was probably a good thing. I had ample time for my (way too numerous) style tests and rounds of redrawing, which first felt like something I was wasting my time on, but looking back to the earlier iterations I cannot help but be glad that I kept trying to improve the style, to reach a level of quality I can be happy about. Now when I look at the finished product I feel no regret in any form or shape. It was well worth it and the book is exactly what I wanted it to be. I had never before pulled off a project of such scale; starting from absolute scratch, and taking it through all phases of production to its final form, so it was indeed a challenge and I wasn't always sure if the book would ever see the light of day. Yet, now the work is done and what is left is to see how people, other than just my friends and family, will receive it.

After all, for me *Säde* has become like a mirror of my capabilities as a storyteller and an artist, but it has also affected me a lot as a person. It is always a pleasure to tell a story through a great character, but with *Säde* it was truly remarkable for me as the creator. So, now that the book is done and hopefully on its way to a publisher sooner or later, I really hope it'll bring a little splash of brightness and imagination to other people's lives as well. A little ray of light.

## CONCLUSIONES en Español

El proceso de creación de este libro ha sido mucho más largo de lo que en un principio estimé. Igualmente, creo que compaginar el trabajo como ilustradora con un año extra trabajando en *Säde* fue una buena idea. He tenido tiempo de sobra para mis (excesivos) tests de estilo y rondas de re-dibujado que, si bien en un principio sentía como una pérdida de tiempo, en retrospectiva debo admitir que me alegra el haber seguido intentando mejorar el estilo hasta un nivel de calidad con el que podía estar contenta. Viendo el resultado final no me arrepiento en absoluto. Mereció la pena y el libro es exactamente lo que quería que fuese. Nunca antes había conseguido completar un proyecto de esta escala; empezando desde cero y pasando por todas las fases de producción hasta su forma final, así que fue en efecto un desafío y en ocasiones he llegado a no estar

segura de si el libro acabaría viendo la luz del día. Aun así, el trabajo está hecho y lo que queda es ver cómo otra gente aparte de mis amigos y familia lo recibirán.

Después de todo, para mí Säde se ha convertido en una especie de espejo de mis capacidades como narradora y artista, pero también me ha afectado mucho como persona. Siempre es un placer contar una historia a través de un gran personaje, pero con Säde ha sido realmente notable para mí como creadora. Ahora, con el libro acabado y con suerte en camino de encontrar editor tarde o temprano, espero sinceramente que también traiga un poco de imaginación a la vida de otras personas. Un pequeño rayo de luz.

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