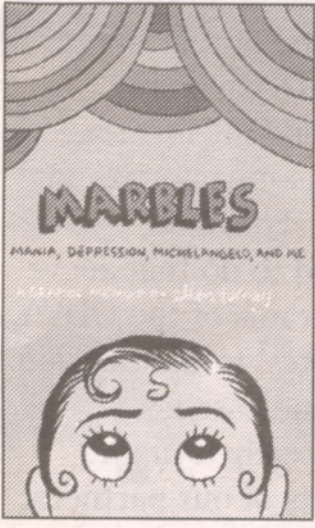


Losing it — or maybe not

After a diagnosis of bipolar disorder, illustrator Ellen Forney worries medication will wipe out her creativity



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

BY JIM DOUGLAS
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

The extreme and unpredictable highs and lows that come with bipolar illness can be like having a frightening head “full of frantic rats.” And even with treatment, the symptoms may continue seemingly without relief. Family and loved ones, as well as the person suffering the problematic behavior, can feel mystified and frustrated by its seemingly inexplicable nature.

Ellen Forney’s “Marbles” may help. It is an engaging, unsettling and informative look at the author’s own experience with the illness, unique in that it is a graphic novel, rather like a black-and-white “comic book.” Forney’s illustrations add an element to her descriptions that words alone cannot create.

The author is a cartoonist whose work regularly appears in Seattle weekly, *The Stranger*. She illustrated Sherman Alexie’s “The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian” and teaches at Cornish College of the Arts. She is not shy in describing the lengthy process by which she attempts to come to grips with — and achieve some relief from — her condition.

Diagnosed at about age 30, Forney describes her treatment with a psychiatrist throughout the entire book. However, she is slow to completely buy into the idea that treatment might actually help. She worries that controlling her mania with medication will squelch her creativity:

“Art was my blood, my heart, my life.” When she was first diagnosed, “the sense of heaviness was alleviated by a back-handed sense of cred.” She imagines herself as a member of “Club (Vincent) van Gogh: Eccentric! Passionate! Tortured! Scary! Deadly! Fire! Ice! Unmoored! Unbridled! Unpredictable! (sic) Dangerous! I was officially a crazy artist.”

She resists taking medication and experiences a succession of increasingly manic episodes. As her thinking becomes more and more revved up, her cartoon illustrations almost vibrate, and her words wrap around her head. Finally, desperation leads her to put herself in the hands of Karen, the psychiatrist. But taking lithium makes it “official.” She is “crazy.”

Forney rides the roller coaster so familiar to people being treated for bipolar disorder. Unpredictable periods of mania and depression lead to changes in medication. When a blood draw shows negative effects, she has to stop taking the medication even though it is helping her symptoms. Expressive cartoons illustrate her reactions to the many different medications. (These reminded me of the humorous conversation in the Oscar-nominated film “Silver Linings Playbook” between the characters played by Bradley Cooper and Jennifer Lawrence, in which they discuss the effects of the various medications they’ve taken for their mental illness.)

In her efforts to gain stability, the author does yoga, tries to make herself swim and keeps a journal of her medications and her moods. She uses what she learns from Karen in cognitive behavioral therapy to “talk back to the internal critic,” listing her “automatic critical thoughts” and the corresponding and more accurate “rational responses.” She also learns to be more open about admitting that she has a mental illness and confides in the few friends who are able to accept the variation in her moods without being judgmental.

But, perhaps above all, because she is an artist, she sketches. “Marbles” includes some of those drawings, which very effectively capture the moods she experiences. Although the story line in the book is drawn in a very straightforward way with simple, bold lines, the sketches vary significantly depending on how the author is feeling at the time and what emotion she is recording.

Despite all these efforts, the author continues to experience periods of mania, during which she “perseverates,” unable to let go of her frustrations. And she has bouts of depression, which leave her with only enough energy to get from bed to couch and back. She has problems with her memory. There is a cartoon drawing of Forney in a rowboat, being pulled away from shore by a wave that is filled with symbols of her illness. She says, “I was sideways, I was upside-down, too energetic to be depressed, too anxious and sad to be manic.”

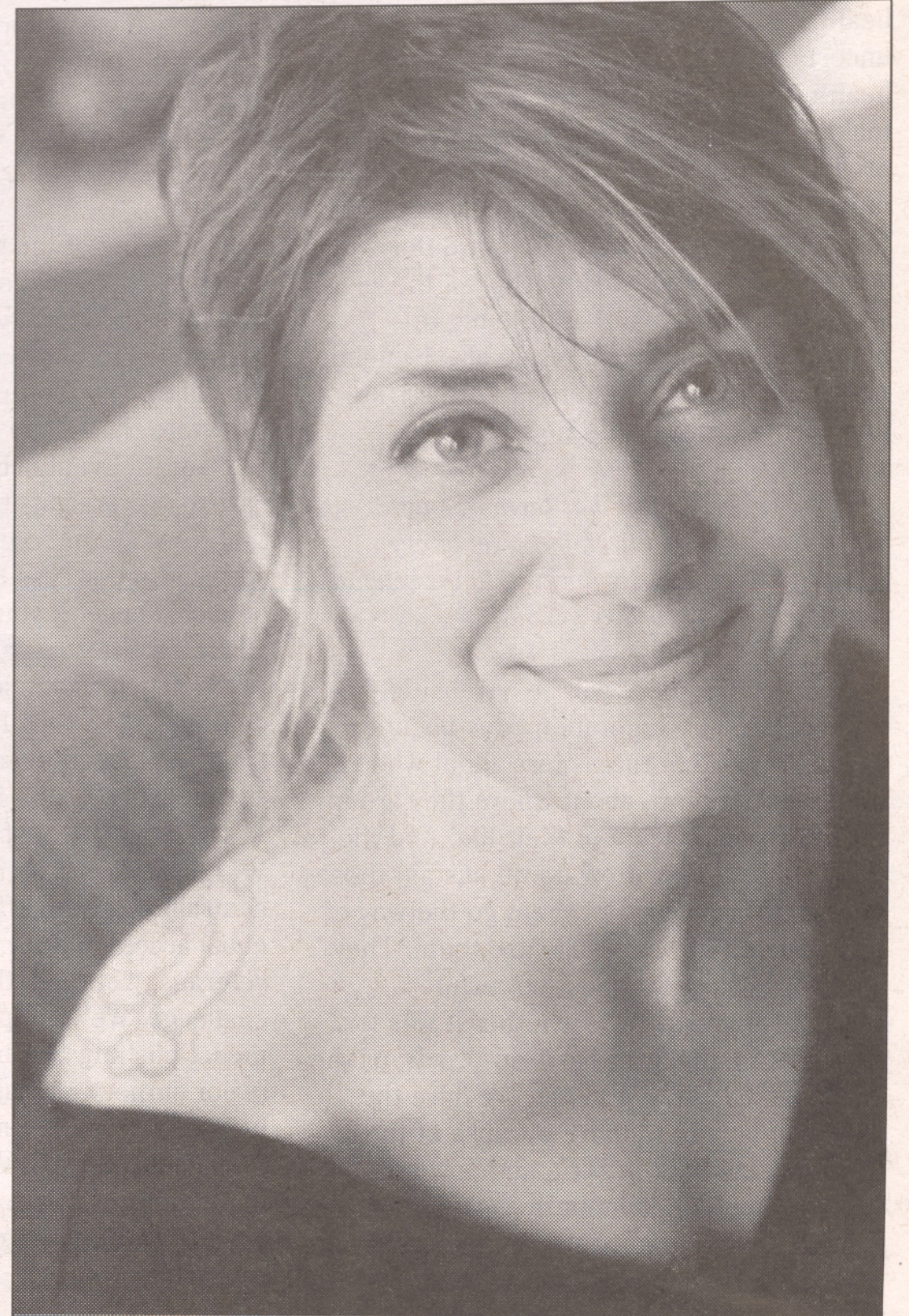


PHOTO BY
JACOB PETER FENNELL

Throughout the book, Forney has a constructive rapport with her psychiatrist and is open about her thinking and activities, with one exception. She doesn’t reveal to Karen that she has held onto her pre-diagnosis habit of regularly smoking marijuana. It is only after several years of treatment that she is able to resolve this issue. Forney’s description of her mental health challenges offers great insight into the ways bipolar illness affects people and their overwhelming challenges to gain stability. Her insight may also provide reassurance to people who are going through a similar experience.

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