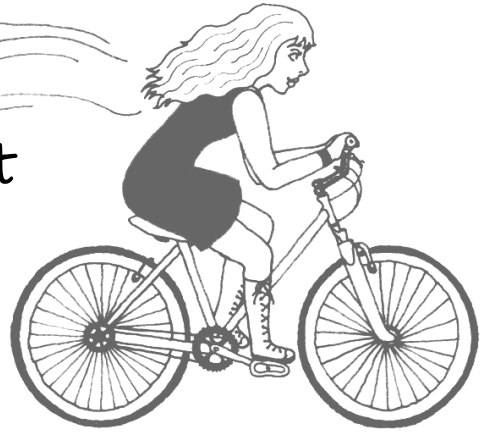


A conversation with  
Keshni Kashyap & Mari Araki about  
**Tina's Mouth**



**What was the inspiration behind the book?**

**KK:** Tina is from a very specific world—a tight-knit ethnic community and family and also a very particular sort of school environment. So yes, the book is inspired by the environment I grew up in. Tina is an outsider in both these worlds, just like I always felt I was. This “outsiderness” may explain why I’ve been drawn to questions that are internal in nature. How do you live an authentic life? How do you figure out who you are in a complicated, multi-ethnic, multi-religious society? I was a pretty shy and anxious teenager and I spent a lot of time alone, not unlike Tina. That’s why existentialism appealed to me. It encourages you to find an anchor within yourself.


**MA:** I have always been in love with Indian culture and art, and this was a project that I was really inspired and excited about; a mix of India and U.S. I’m Japanese from Japan. But, I’ve also lived in the U.S. for many years. So I understood the multicultural aspect of it. Also, in my paintings, I look a lot at self-exploration, so in that way, I understood the existential questions.

**How much research on existentialism did you do?**

**KK:** I did take a class in high school on existentialism and I remember loving it. I never kept an existential diary though, so I didn’t know exactly what I was thinking about then. To research *Tina’s Mouth* so many years later, I did—in a streak of great ambition—try to read *Being and Nothingness* by Jean-Paul Sartre and quickly moved to re-reading Sartre’s plays like *No Exit*, *The Wall* and *Nausea* which are easier to digest. I also read a bit about Sartre himself, trying to understand how and why he would appeal to Tina. I felt that the answer lay in his unabashed mandate to live an authentic life; that an authentic life is earned instead of bestowed or even learned and that authenticity actually builds better societies.

**The story is told through the eyes of a fifteen year old girl. How did you channel existentialism through the mind of a teenager?**

**KK:** The most useful bit of help I got was when I reached out to my now-retired high school existentialism teacher, the amazing Jim Parkman. I sent him a page of questions and he wrote me this hilarious and beautiful breakdown of the basic tenets of existential thought, and some of the obvious differences between, say, Sartre and Camus, who were rivals. He also had a lot of funny points (and brought up some nice memories) about teaching existentialism to a room full of fourteen- and fifteen-year-olds.



**MA:** They are basic questions about existence that Tina is asking. Of course, I understood them because I was also fifteen and I felt that I was searching (am still searching) for mine. Also Tina's one of those strong edgy girls and I liked that. But, my job was to get Keshni's point across, so it was also about us having conversations.

### **How has your work in film informed the book?**

**KK:** In many ways. When I read *Persepolis*, I fell in love with the form. It made a lot of sense to me. What appeals to me the most is that you can make comics almost novelistic in a way you can't with film. In general, images have more power than words—especially in our society. And when you put words and images together, they aren't easily miscible. They fight with each other. The creativity of the graphic novel form really allows you figure that puzzle out. As nerdy as this sounds, that's what drew me to the form—playing with that puzzle. Of course, it's also a lot of fun to write a book and work with an illustrator. It's like making a movie, but you're only two people and you have no one to answer to but yourselves.

### **How do you think this book is different from other graphic novels?**

**KK:** Mari is a surrealist painter and I'm a filmmaker by training with roots in art and experimental film. Neither one of us ever really set out to write comics. We never really tried to do anything but make the story work; physically, it looks different from the average comic book. I also think the most obvious difference is that the book is writer-driven as opposed to illustrator-driven, and that is less common, Neil Gaiman and Harvey Pekar being the most obvious and brilliant exceptions.

### **What was the process and how did the two of you work together?**

**KK:** It was my favorite part of the process. I wrote the script and then Mari drew, and we worked and re-worked. We had to constantly come up with new solutions to problems, which was difficult, but Mari was incredibly patient. The book has close to a thousand drawings, and that is only a fraction of what she originally drew. Honestly some of the most fun I've ever had was sitting around a table for hours on end, working with Mari. We even went to Las Vegas when we were finishing the first draft and locked ourselves up for three days at a resort.

**MA:** It was definitely my favorite part too. We just kept going back and forth. Making things more specific. Doing layouts together, fixing emotions, changing the way a character looked. Becoming close to Keshni made it easier for me to understand and connect with Tina and the story.

