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Shortcomings



Synopsis

The 2007 New York Times Book Review Notable Book now in paperback. Lauded for its provocative and insightful portrayal of interpersonal relationships, Adrian Tomine's politically charged *Shortcomings* was one of the most acclaimed books of 2007. Among many interviews and reviews in outlets around the country, Tomine was interviewed by Terry Gross on NPR's *Fresh Air* and also in *The Believer*, *New York* magazine, and *Giant Robot*. *Shortcomings* landed on countless "best of" lists, including those in *Entertainment Weekly* and *The New York Times*; was praised by Junot Díaz in *Publishers Weekly*; and was the subject of a solo review in *The New York Times Book Review* that drew comparison between Tomine and Philip Roth. The groundbreaking graphic novel now returns in paperback.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Written in 3 "chapters," which are more like 3 film Acts, *Shortcomings* tells the tale of cynical, lust-soaked Ben Tanaka, a 30-year-old movie house manager in Berkeley. Even though his girlfriend Miko is a gorgeous Japanese cultural activist with sensitivity and intelligence, Ben's wandering eye for Anglo girls and his surly attitude cause friction in his relationship with disastrous consequences. Ben finds solace in his only friend, Alice, a spunky, sharp lesbian who attends Mills College. In this context, *Shortcomings* explores with sadness and hilarity sexual and racial stereotypes and the painful search for an authentic identity. The characters are painfully realistic, beset by misguided desires, raging egos, and intense selfishness. But Tomine's brilliance as an artist is to give his characters complexity, believability, and, yes, our sympathy. I was sad after I

finished the book in 90 minutes of reading because I loved the characters and wanted to spend more time with them and found myself fantasizing a long-running TV show about them or a series of more graphic novels so I could follow their lives in more depth. Such is the pang this great book left me.

I loved Tomine's early collections, *32 Stories* and *Sleepwalk*, but his last one (*Summer Blonde*) was a bit of a disappointment, feeling like a rehash of earlier material. This latest book collects issues 9-11 of *Optic Nerve* into a single narrative arc following a single protagonist. Despite this move from short story to novella-length, Tomine largely fails to take advantage of the space afforded to move into new thematic territory. His work has always focused on loneliness, and yet again the main character is a socially awkward semi-hipster who tends to alienate people. Ben Tanaka is a 30-year-old manager of an art house cinema in Berkeley (presumably the UC Theater, which like the one Ben manages, was forced to close to due seismic retrofitting regulations), living with his beautiful Japanese-American girlfriend Miko. The story follows Ben's dying relationship with Miko and subsequent rebound attempts with various cute Anglo girls. But Ben is so plagued by insecurity and bitter snobbishness, and is so grumpy and cynical that it becomes increasingly hard as the book progresses to understand what any woman would see in him. The one new theme Tomine introduces to his work is the struggle to define identity and identity politics among Asian-Americans. Ben, Miko, and even Ben's moxie-laden Korean-American lesbian pal Alice (who tend to steal any scene she's in), all grapple with various stereotypes and self-imposed expectations. However, none of this seems particularly inventive or fresh, and some scenes, such as Alice taking Ben to a family wedding as her beard feel particularly recycled. Then again, I'm not Asian-American, so maybe it has more resonance for that audience. As usual, Tomine's art is amazing -- his attention to framing, line, and composition are second to none. That said, sometimes his faces tend to drift into similarity -- in a story where race is so central, it's not a good thing when an Anglo guy key to the story looks Asian. As with his other work, those familiar with the East Bay will recognize a lot of the backgrounds (Rockridge, the Durant food court, Cody's, etc.). On the whole, the book is a disappointment -- it's just way too similar in tone and subject matter to his previous work. Tomine clearly is comfortable in the Berkeley-to-Brooklyn world of 20-30something hipster creative singletons and their friendships and relationships. But that's a pretty insular world, and I'd love to see him break out of it and turn his sharp observational gaze elsewhere. He got married last year, so maybe that'll lead to new directions in his storytelling.

I'm probably not an objective reviewer. I'm a white woman married to an Asian man, and we lived in the Bay Area for many years, so the subject matter was a bit close to the bone for me. At several points in the novel, I felt as though someone had been eavesdropping on my conversations. Tomine also does a great job of conveying subtle emotions through facial expressions. I loved it, and not just for the local references and jokes about Asian identity politics.

Wow, this is just story telling at its finest. Ever watch an embarrassing moment in slow motion? That was the pace of the book. The main character's frustrations on society and his views of himself is overwhelmingly college-like. There are some very funny moments in the book. Adrian does a good job addressing some stereotypes but does not openly dispel any of it. I felt that he kind of spells it out for the reader but it is up to the reader to believe them or not and that might be worth more than the story itself. I found myself questioning on how much I really know about other cultures and let alone other cultures that have one or two generations in America. I hope that Adrian Tomine continues the main character in other books.

I've read this every couple of years since it was published and it's remarkable to me how much there is so much to see in this slight volume. My sympathies tend to rearrange on each reading -- Ben is the type of character that makes me veer between wanting to slap him and hug him in the space of a page or two. Tomine has such a knack at portraying awkward moments, there are a couple of scenes in here that feel so real it is almost as if they happened to me. One of my favorite realist graphic novels -- the entire thing just feels drawn from life.

All of Adrian's work is worth checking out. Yet, Shortcomings was a story that made me think about who I am more than any of Tomine's other works; nonetheless, the story and characters are as real as the air we breath. If you can't enjoy this work of art you may have to seek professional help. Enjoy Short Comings and all other work by Adrian Tomine--check out other Optic Nerve writings.

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