



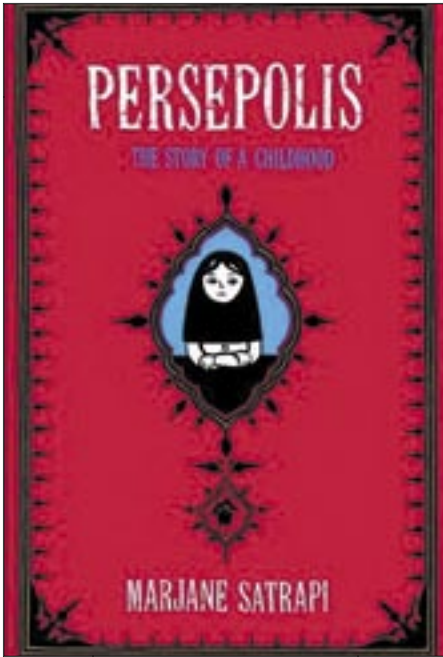
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# Persepolis:

## The story of a childhood

**G**raphic novels are somewhat of a male preserve. Despite their recent respectability, they are often associated with their under-developed sibling, the comic book. The dominance of fantasy, of the hyper-masculine hero with his classically split self (think *The Hulk* or *Superman*), and ultra-physi-

cal expression in face of conflict has led critics to accuse the both genres of a nostalgia neurosis: an “undermining of self-actualization by compelling us to retreat into a private dream-world.” But since the 1970s the graphic novel, and the adult comic, have claimed a greater stake in the cultural world than ever before. The 1960s saw underground U.S. illustrators, artists, and writers proclaiming an alternative to the inoffensive “funnies” of the daily newspapers and the kids’ comics. Following from Robert Crumb’s fetishized female, the American comic scene came of age in a blitz of obscenity – its subject matter ranging from polymorphous sexuality to racism.

It wasn’t until Art Spiegelman’s Pulitzer-prize winning graphic novel, *Maus*, that the genre was finally brought into the mainstream intellectual scene. Dealing with the traumatic generational inheritance of the Holocaust, *Maus* seemed to legitimize the art-form. Spiegelman’s sombre black and white frames, innovative visual and narrative styles signalled a complexity of response to the horrors of the camps that was both mature and groundbreaking. The graphic novel, as it became known, was recognised as a political form. From their role in counter-culture movements, graphic novels became part of the consumable corpus of literature. Today the graphic novel is yet more marketable, and main-

stream: with many works making the best-seller lists.

However, a question arises when looking at the mainstream graphic novels: where are the women writers and illustrators? Yet there is a wealth of female work in comics and graphic novels – most of it explicitly political in content. Aline Crumb’s *Love That Bunch* (1990) with its thoughts on physicality, and female sexuality, Diane Massa’s *Hothead Paisan: Homicidal Lesbian Terrorist*, Roberta Gregory’s *A Bitch is Born*

(1994). There is a strong female tradition of comic-book making and graphic novels. In these works the autobiographical mode – often associated with women’s writing – is used to critique and argue against constrictive norms, to challenge ideals of

femininity and to explore diverse forms of sexuality often inscribed in gendered terms. They are politi-



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cally and historically engaged. Why, then, are “serious” graphic novels predominantly by men?

It is Marjane Satrapi’s *Persepolis* that looks set to establish female graphic artists in the mainstream. *Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood* follows Marjane’s early life in Tehran. The daughter of liberal parents, she witnesses the beginning of the Islamic Revolution in Iran, the impact of the war with Iraq on her family and friends, and the state’s increased repressiveness. Illustrated in stark, monochromatic frames, *Persepolis* culminates in the teenage Marjane leaving Iran, and her parents, behind. Satrapi does not replicate the naive idea that Iran is necessarily an “evil” or “terrorist” state, simply by virtue of its Islamic



government, but explores the personal repercussions of the state’s gender ideology. The personal narrative is complicated with references to political texts, and prefaced with a historical introduction to Iran which serves to remind the reader of the West’s insistent intervention in the Middle East, as well as of Iran’s classical heritage. Satrapi reminds us that Britain and

America are implicated in much of the turbulent history of Iran, and states “this old and great civilization has been discussed mostly in connection with fundamentalism, fanaticism, and terrorism...this image is far from the truth.”

*Persepolis* counteracts the news-reel image of women in Iran, but also decries what the destruction of civil liberties in Iran. The women in her books are vibrant, good-humoured, passionate and argumentative. Satrapi’s mother is an educated woman who not only refuses to be defined by her gender but encourages her daughter to “defend her rights as a woman”. *Persepolis* is not solely about the impact of the regime on women, but its first-person female narration means that gender identity is a key component in its political critique. When universities are closed, Marjane weeps at the loss of a future; “I wanted to be like Marie Curie. I wanted to be an educated, liberated woman. Misery! At the age that Marie Curie went to study, I’ll probably have ten children...” The adolescent drama may be humorous, but the import is serious: the limitations on education and particularly women’s education and employment infringe on both their real, and possible, lives. Satrapi’s novel is important on several levels: for its infiltration of a genre dominated by men, that commands both populist and political power, and for her talent in uniting visual, intellectual, and emotional ideas that demand our reassessment of women’s position in Iran. *Persepolis* reminds us, in a new and important way, that all women’s personal history is inextricable from political history.

Rebecca Barr

