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Dave McKean's first original graphic novel since his landmark book *Cages* brings to bear the astonishing range of illustrative and storytelling skills that have served him so well on his collaborations

- Sales Rank: #12332912 in Books
- Published on: 2012
- Binding: Comic

Most helpful customer reviews

15 of 16 people found the following review helpful.

Dave McKean Brings Erotica to Graphic Novels

By Count Orlok '22

Dave McKean (the artist behind "Batman: Arkham Asylum" and "Mr. Punch") is one of my favorite modern artists and his comic book works are astonishingly beautiful and haunting. His unique visual sensibility makes this text-less graphic erotica completely original. In terms of wordless graphic novels, I've only read a few and this one is intriguing since it incorporates fantasy elements with reality and with no textual explanation. Like all of his work it is wondrously imaginative and slightly unnerving, yet in a way that is never gratuitously titillating or disturbing, at least not by my own standards.

"Celluloid" is a work of art that creatively explores rather than cheaply exploits human sexuality. Whether it will be viewed as such or not remains to be seen, but this is indeed a groundbreaking effort in a medium that is still perceived by many to be just for kids. To have erotica available within such a medium could be potentially very controversial, but it could also be an important stepping stone along the path to cementing the fact that graphic literature isn't just for children; that it can be artful, complex, and as adult-oriented as any other storytelling media.

The book, which is 232 pages, reads (or views rather, since there is no text) very quickly as a work of erotica should and I found that instead of examining each page and the details of the artwork for a long duration, I went through it quickly. I then read/viewed it again. In some ways, the experience of reading the book was similar to that of watching an old silent film, which may very well have been intentional as McKean has stated numerous times that he loves old European silent films and that they were an early influence on his visual style. (In fact McKean is currently working on an evocative series of multi-media paintings entitled "Nitrate" which are an homage to some of the masterpieces of the early cinema. Some of these paintings have been on display as part of the Nitrate + Kinogeists exhibitions, the catalogs of which can be found [here](#) and [here](#).)

The story tells the tale of a woman who becomes disappointed when the man she lives with isn't able to come home and make love to her because he's busy with work. So, she resorts to taking a bath and then pleasuring herself on the sofa. But she ends up finding a film projector and curiosity takes hold of her. As the images begin to explode on the wall she realizes that the film is of a sexual nature but before she can absorb the details of the film the reel burns out and in the place of the projection is a set of ornate doors leading into another world. She walks through them and finds herself in a strange, somewhat eerie, and very sexual

fantasia where people make love in public view. The woman comes across numerous film projectors in this strangely sensual world and with each viewing of the film she is transported to another locale where she makes love to a startlingly vivid and intriguingly bizarre character. During these sexual encounters she makes love to a woman with fourteen breasts and grape vines for hair, a very well endowed demon whom she satiates orally, and then finally a benevolent shadowy figure who emerges from a vulva-like structure in the ceiling.

Meanwhile the woman's lover back in the real world comes home to their apartment and discovers the film projector and plays the reel of film... at which point it is revealed that the couple having sex in the film is the woman he lives with and the shadowy figure. Their eyes lock and the question remains: is this reality or is this a dream? And if so, whose dream is it, his or hers?

Regarding the art, the book encompasses many styles that shift and flow seductively from stylized photography to expressionistic pastel drawings, from colorful surrealist paintings to simplistic sepia-toned illustrations. In fact, from a critical standpoint, some of the pictures are gorgeous and would be welcome additions to modern art museums as stand-alone works.

McKean was smart to label the book as pornography since many of the images are indeed very graphic in their anatomical depictions of sexual behavior ranging from voyeurism to masturbation, from oral sex to intercourse. Despite their vivid imagery and provocative nature, I never found them to be disturbing or vulgar (though others will have a different reaction, I'm sure).

Normally, I have little to no interest in pornography or explicitly graphic erotica (although I do love John Cleland's "Fanny Hill: Memoirs Of A Woman of Pleasure" and the illustrations of French artist Édouard-Henri Avril). But I consider this to be a mature and artistic approach to the subject matter and at no point did it seem to denigrate sexuality, or devolve to purely exploitative depictions of either gender, nor does it wreak of the overtly misogynistic commercialism of more mainstream - if that word can be applied - erotica and pornography. This work isn't exploitative smut to be viewed at with shame. It's a celebratory expression of mutual pleasure; a sensual reverie to be shared.

13 of 15 people found the following review helpful.

Either challenging or confusing

By A. KAPLAN

It's great to see a new graphic novel by Dave McKean. He's so well-known as an illustrator and cover artist, but we rarely see his sequential art (and even more rarely illustrating his own stories). Celluloid, told primarily in single-panel pages, is a dream/nightmare-like erotic hallucination, featuring a series of sexual scenes illustrated in a variety of styles. The art is gorgeous, and show McKean as a master at the top of his game.

As for the story... I'm not sure I understood it. I think it's going to take another couple of reads at least. Either I'm missing stuff, or it's just a series of images. (Or maybe both, and I'm just failing to make connections.) I can follow the flow of the story from panel to panel and page to page. I'm just not sure what it all means. (There's nothing wrong with artwork that challenges the reader. I'm just not sure how exactly I'm being challenged.)

So high points for the art, and for the potential of the storytelling, but lower marks for clarity or accessibility.

6 of 7 people found the following review helpful.

Relies heavily on intellect and emotion, rather than just arousal and titillation

By GraphicNovelReporter.com

Dave McKean, an artist best known for his work on Batman: Arkham Asylum and frequent collaborations with Neil Gaiman on Sandman and the film MirrorMask, breaks away from the mainstream with Celluloid, a

finely-tuned and erotic graphic novel.

Erotica can be a fickle, alienating genre. In American culture, it's generally something to be shied away from, typically in favor of far more obscene acts of violence. Improperly crafted, it can turn away more people than it can attract and may end up being more embarrassing than stimulating. As such, it's a risky venture for a well-known, mainstream artist like Dave McKean to turn to. Many may immediately dismiss his latest as a work of puerile deviancy, but those sorts likely wouldn't even bother examining the book before casting such aspersions upon it. Although it is most certainly, and openly, erotic, *Celluloid* manages to be so much more than its label implies.

The book portrays a sexual odyssey in which a woman discovers an old film projector in her apartment. She is surprised to find it loaded with a pornographic movie, but as it plays, it begins to open a door into another world. Curious, she steps through and discovers a fantastic cityscape populated with phantom couples making love, along with another film projector that pulls her deeper into this new world.

What follows is a story of sexual growth and empowerment. She begins the story as a voyeur, but as she embraces the newly revealed and expanding worlds of physical pleasure, her self-confidence grows and she finds the strength to not be a subject of voyeurism herself. The landscapes and colors of the world change around her as she grows bolder in her participation, and McKean's artwork gains greater dimensionality as his central character grows more assertive.

Without any dialogue or captions, *Celluloid* is strictly a visual narrative. It has a very film-like feel to it, which is appropriate given the MacGuffin that launches both the readers and the book's character on its journey. The book unfolds like a spool of film, each page like frames in the reel. The pace of the story is left up to the reader, but McKean has created such lush visuals that many will want to linger and examine the intricacies of the imagery presented. One particularly compelling page comes early in the story and presents the nude woman watching the film while ghost-like hands and arms reach out toward her from nowhere. It's an impressive, striking piece of art on multiple levels.

McKean combines several artistic mediums in order to tell his tale. His characters are stylized sketches, but as the story develops, he begins to create collages that merge his drawings with digital paintings and photographs of models and still-life objects. Without any words to give us clues as to what the female lead is thinking or feeling, McKean relies on distorted perspective and abstract visuals to project emotion and to create a shared sense of journey between the readers and the woman. The artwork becomes an incredible thing of beauty that showcases the interplay between light, shadow, and color, taking on surrealistic and expressionistic styles. The story is inflected with supernatural metaphors, while characters are paralleled and juxtaposed against photographed objects. By combining these photographs with illustration, the story rises to a new level, creating an increasing sense of dimensionality that exhibits the woman's growth as a sexual being.

While *Celluloid* is certainly an adults-only venture, it hardly seems fair to label it pornography, a title that has become akin to the dirtiest of words in American groupthink. It is rife with sexual imagery, but it is so well crafted and artfully composed that it would be shameful for the book to be lost amongst lesser, smuttier works. Rather than being raunchy or demeaning or exploitative, McKean has taken the high road and created a work that rises above the genre of simple erotica and rests comfortably on an artistic level. Many of the pages are so well crafted in their surrealistic imagery that they could easily hang beside Picasso. McKean has boldly stepped away from the confines of mainstream comic books with this endeavor, and the result is a masterpiece of eroticism that relies heavily on intellect and emotion, rather than just mere arousal or titillation.

-- Michael Hicks

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