

Novel Club January 2019 Minutes

The January meeting of the Novel Club met at the Stupay home in Cleveland Heights on January 8. The table was laden with treats of all sorts, and beverages were abundant in the kitchen, and many of us took a few minutes to admire the art collection on display throughout the apartment. Guests Tom Vessler, Kent Smith, and Jonathan were introduced. All have attended before and were contributed fully to the evening. After approving the minutes, and a quick report from the treasurer that dues collection is going well, discussion began. Our book was *Persepolis*, by Marjane Satrapi.

Jennie Kaffen delivered the biographical paper on Satrapi. Most of the paper was drawn from watching interviews of the author, who currently lives in Paris, France. Her childhood is well documented in the book, so the focus of the paper was on what she does now. Satrapi enjoys making provocative statements in interviews, and most of her interviews include plenty of swearing. In at least one interview, she smokes throughout. Satrapi tells us that she originally wrote the book because so many people asked her about her life that she decided to write it down so she could direct them to the book rather than asking so many questions. She has clearly grown since her earlier interviews, as she is able to provide clearer analysis of her work. Jennie noted that her drawings of herself are quite accurate, and mentioned that we will likely hear more from her in the future.

Joyce Kessler delivered the critical paper. She began by outlining the many reasons for reading this book. For one thing, this book is new, well respected, and about a compelling central idea of losing one's home. Joyce addressed the origins of comics, as this is a graphic novel, our first if not only, read in the Novel Club. She noted that in a book of this genre, each component should be read on its own; the pictures are not illustrations of the text, rather they stand on their own. While graphic novels are widely accepted and respected, we still do not have a cannon of graphic novels, so interpretation is wide open.

For questions, Joyce supplied us with handouts with photocopies of segments of the book to facilitate discussion. She asked us to look at the pictures and to discuss how the words said something different from the pictures. This allowed us to look at the book with a new eye, noticing details perhaps overlooked before. For instance, the scene in which the young Marjane is sent away for the first time compared to the scene in which she returns to Europe as a young woman shows us the same figures in the same positions, but with different shading and different expressions on family faces and in the surrounding people. The changes are subtle, yet powerfully different.

Our first question challenged us to have a look at the image of the girls experiencing veils for the first time and discuss what the pictures tell us that the text does not. The picture, it was said, humanizes the subjects, and immediately shows that the author felt herself to be a bit of an outsider. The next question concerned the genre. Does bi-textual narrative engage the reader more, as scholar Lorraine Kooistra says, or does the picture overwhelm the text, as

Henry James suggests. It was pointed out that this book told something in a picture that would take Henry James hundreds of words. The pictures lend emotion, and many members found them moving. Some felt a reader could understand the entire story simply by “reading” the pictures, not even reading the words.

Another question asked whether the black and white format worked, and what is meant by showing black figures against a white background and vice versa. This sparked a multitude of reactions. One felt the simplicity of the black and white carried a great deal of emotion, another felt it was like watching a film noir. Another commented that because of its simple nature, the graphics did not overwhelm the text, so it kept its balance as a novel.

Discussion covered all important aspects of the novel, and much focused on the nature of the graphic novel in general. The Novel Club as a whole received this book positively. A few members had recommendations for further reading including *My Iran* by Isaac Yumtomavian, and the graphic novel *Maus*, by Art Stiegalman, which won the Pulitzer prize in 1992. Thanks to our hosts, as well as the presenters, an enriching and enjoyable evening was had by all.