

WENDEL ALL TOGETHER

by Howard Cruse. Olmstead Press, 2001; \$17.95 softcover.

In the course of his 30-year career, cartoonist Howard Cruse has lived two seemingly disparate struggles: the fight by sexual minorities for civil and social rights on the one hand, and the establishment of comics as a unique artistic and literary medium on the other.

Founding the underground *Gay Comics* anthology in 1980, he created an outlet for future queer creators to address themes of sexual identity. Cruse received critical praise for his 1996 graphic novel *Stuck Rubber Baby*, an autobiographically inspired coming-out story set in Alabama during the height of the '60s civil rights movement.

In between, there was *Wendel*. Published in the back pages of the *Advocate* from 1983 to 1989, the comic strip portrayed the lives of Wendel Trupstock; his partner, Ollie Chalmers; and a cast of funny, memorable characters caught up in the personal and political problems of the era—parental rejection, religious zealotry, Reagan indifference/opportunism, infighting among gay liberationists and, of course, AIDS. All disrupt the lives of Wendel et al. as they try to maintain healthy relationships, pursue artistic careers, work lousy jobs, do the laundry and maybe have a little sex once in a while.

After more than a decade, this long-overdue collection of everything *Wendel* demonstrates the strengths of Cruse's writing, his attention to the nuances of dialogue and the seamless interweaving of his characters' complex back stories.

Consider Ollie. An amateur actor with big Hollywood dreams, he endures unrewarding low-wage work to support his hyper-imaginative pubescent son, Farley, for whose custody he must painstakingly negotiate with his neurotic ex-wife. No mean feat that, since Carol, still traumatized by his coming out, refuses to be in the same room with Wendel.

Such a circumstance could be the stuff of either melodrama or farce. But Cruse succeeds at plumbing humor from these situations by treating his characters with sympathy and respect, deftly balancing the absurdity of their complications with the sincerity of their love and aspirations.

Equally impressive is how well Cruse's interplay of the political and the personal remains relevant. Some satirical targets—Bible-thumping homophobes and social insensitivity toward AIDS—are so familiar to us now, they risk being read as clichés. But in the 1980s, these

Burnin' down the house

Queer comic collections portray a history of civil rights—and neuroticism

BY KEVIN MOORE



Ollie and Wendel plot revolution over cornflakes in a typical domestic scene from *Wendel All Together*

topics were fresh, not to mention frightening; for Cruse, they were obviously quite personal. By training his sharp eye for humor on the otherwise tragic, he avoids the hackneyed and the maudlin, finding novel and sometimes illuminating takes on subjects that, sadly, find ways to vex us still.

Cruse draws as beautifully as he writes. Carefully crafted, his artwork can still be lively and loose—silly at all the right moments, tender at others. Inspired by the classic "big foot" style of golden age comics, he renders his characters larger than life, with the long legs and thick arms of figures in a social realist painting.

Nonetheless, he displays a sensitive eye for body type. Men and women can appear ideal, sexy or dramatic one moment, then rubbery, goofy and comic the next, all the while remaining in character and retaining a warm humanity.

BRUNO: PDX—LOVE, GOD, SEX AND CINEMA
by C. Baldwin. Moody Cow Publishing, 2001; \$9.95 softcover.

As *Wendel* inspired *Dykes to Watch Out For*, so in turn has Alison Bechdel's work inspired Chris Baldwin's *Bruno*. In other words, a gay man's comic strip begat a lesbian strip, which begat this daily online strip about a bisexual woman by a straight man. Paradoxical?

Not really—such is the transcendent power of good art.

And Baldwin does not let his artistic foreparents down. His strip, the continuing story of an intelligent, talented young woman wandering aimlessly (yet humorously) through life, has attracted a dedicated international readership



Bruno is blessed (or cursed?) with compassionate lovers in *Bruno: PDX—Love, God, Sex and Cinema*

thanks to the global reach of the Web. Baldwin has kept this audience by consistently delivering a gorgeously rendered and witty saga of young love, artistic aspiration, intellectual confusion and occasional slapstick.

This latest collection (the sixth) finds Bruno frustrated with her Massachusetts hometown. Discovering Portland via a theatrical road trip, she falls for our beautiful city and decides to live here.

Pretty soon she becomes romantically involved with two lovers simultaneously, one male and one female. Fortunately, they know of each other and are cool with the situation. Unfortunately, not so the emotionally volatile Bruno.

Her ensuing trips to a variety of therapists and her confessions to sympathetic friends afford sophisticated laughs but also thoughtful meditation on the ambiguities of love and relationships. As the title suggests, there is more on the plate; Baldwin serves it up with tenderness and class. **JM**

WENDEL ALL TOGETHER can be found at bookstores or www.howardcruse.com. A new BRUNO appears six days a week at www.brunostrip.com. Collections can be purchased at *Reading Frenzy* or www.moodycow.com.

KEVIN MOORE is a cartoonist-identified graphic designer at Just Out.

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