

BOOKS

Panel discussion

Graphic novels incorporate poignant queer storylines

BY CHRISTOPHER MCQUAIN

If, like me, your approach to the world of comics and graphic novels is that of a curious dilettante, the feverish relationship many diehard fans appear to have to the swords 'n' sorcerers/superhero "genre" comics can seem impenetrable, if not downright amusing. (I've had friends in the business confirm to me that when the writers of *The Simpsons* created the smug, insular "Comic Book Guy" character, it was only a very slight exaggeration).

But then there are the *other* comics—the most famous examples are probably Peter Bagge's *Hate* and Art Spiegelman's Pulitzer-winning *Maus* series—that offer more expansive, relatable themes to those of us outside the stereotyped comics niche. Oni Press, an internationally admired comic publishing house based in Portland, has a proud history of furthering this nonfantastical vein; many of its books center around recognizably human characters, and its best releases feature poignant, dramatic storylines that leaven a deceptively simple visual style with a certain punkish (or perhaps new wave-ish) irreverence and a healthy dose of kitchen-sink pathos.

Two recent Oni offerings are of particular interest for placing queer storylines within their panels: *Maria's Wedding*, a graphic novel written by Nunzio DeFilippis and Christina Weir and illustrated by Jose Garibaldi, and *Hopeless Savages*, a series written by Jen van Meter and illustrated by a rotating group of artists, most recently Christine Norrie.

Savages is the ongoing episodic chronicle of the lives of an ultraprogressive yet structurally traditional punk rock family. (The dad's punk moniker is Dirk Hopeless, and the mom is

named Nikki Savage; hence, the coolest hyphenated name ever.)

Twitch, the second-youngest Hopeless-Savage, is gay. He has apparently had his share of boy trouble, though the latest *Savages* miniseries, *Too Much Hopeless Savages*, finds him more or less happily in love with a young Asian-American man named Henry Shi. Henry's brother Claude is dating another Hopeless-Savage, Twitch's older sister Arsenal (only in the most modern families do monikers like these come into play), and we follow the four along on a trip to Hong Kong, where they receive troubling psychic predictions from Henry's mystical-soothsaying great-grandmoth-



Hopeless Savages chronicles the lives of a punk rock family.



An Italian-American family feuds during *Maria's Wedding*.

er and are caught in the web of some sort of secret-agent sabotage presumably to be explained in the rest of the series. (This is the first of four installments.) The zesty, textured

drawings, lively storylines and unique characterizations comprise an enticing mixture of those usually oxymoronic elements, hipness and warmth.

An additional note: *Hopeless Savages: Ground Zero*, a recently published compilation of the second *Savages* series, is highly recommended to neophytes. It offers not only the necessary context for maximal appreciation of *Too Much Hopeless Savages*, it also contains a tender passage wherein Twitch tries to help his sister, who's having love troubles, by sharing with her what he knows about boys.

Maria's Wedding opens with a flashback to the Unitarian commitment ceremony of Joseph—the older brother of our protagonist, twentysomething Frankie Pirelli—and Matthew. Their nontraditional union has caused a rift in the extended Italian-American Pirelli family, many of whom disapproved or refused to attend, and is a major source of tension as they gather for the nups of Maria, Frankie's cousin, to a man of dubious personality.

All of the action takes place on the day of Maria's wedding, which makes for a disciplined, focused, short/sweet narrative while still managing to vividly encompass each nuclear unit of the vast Pirelli clan. Each character is charmingly drawn, and there's an evocative black-and-white elegance throughout. *Maria's Wedding* has a fine, cinematic style and sense of framing; it's like *Raging Bull* as a family-drama comic book. [A]

The PORTLAND COMIC BOOK SHOW will be held from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. March 6 at Memorial Coliseum, 300 N. Winning Way. Admission is \$6.

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