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## books



## Tough Love and Roses

Graphic novel creator Abby Denson comes to Portland  
by Andy Mangels

Comic book fans and kids might know her work from periodicals such as *The Powerpuff Girls*, *The Simpsons*, *Disney Adventures* and *Nickelodeon* magazine, but Abby Denson has a much more focused plan to reach kids with her new book. She is promoting *Tough Love: High School Confidential* (Manic D Press, 2006; \$12.95 softcover), an homage to Japanese gayesque love comics and a beacon of hope to gay teens.

"I wanted to do a romance story, and I thought it would be a good twist to make it a gay romance," Denson says. "Also, I wanted to show that gay people are just as human as anybody else."

A fan of "shounen-ai," the term for Japanese comics (manga) about beautiful boys in love—made for and by straight women—Denson chose that style to create her serialized story. "I was inspired by shounen-ai manga's basic subject matter: androgynous gay boys. However, *Tough Love* is about actual gay teens in an American suburb as opposed to a fantasy concept of what gay boys are like. I was also inspired by manga and my own kung fu training to include martial arts."

The story in *Tough Love* follows a pair of high school boys, Chris and Brian, who must deal with coming out to family, gay-bashing, a suicide attempt and how to delicately break up with the straight girl one of them dates without the whole school finding out their secret. Although the art style is simplistic and clean, Denson has a strong emotional core lacking in some shounen-ai that has recently started being translated to English and sold at Portland stores such as CounterMedia.

Asked the inevitable question about how closely she knows about the subject of coming out, Denson says: "I consider myself straight, I suppose."



Abby Denson's *Tough Love* was inspired by "shounen-ai," a style of melodramatic Japanese comics by girls about gay boys.

I've had some queer experiences and relationships, but my last few serious ones and current one have been with males. I like to think when you love somebody, gender shouldn't matter so much, but it is obviously a very complicated issue. Since I've luckily had a gay-friendly upbringing—my mom isn't homophobic, my dad is gay, one of my uncles is gay—I have strong feelings about gay rights, and I'm coming from a unique point of view."

Denson notes that many people have asked her why she would choose to do a story like *Tough Love* as her debut graphic novel. "In a way it's flattering, because it often comes from the angle that they can't believe a straight person could write so realistically about gay people. On the other hand, there's plenty of fiction out there that doesn't get that assumption. Nobody asks J.K. Rowling about how she can write about boy wizards since she isn't one. I guess since I'm writing about events that could actually happen, it hits home and people look at it as something very real."

That reality has hit home in reaction from the serial and its book collection. "The best reactions I get to *Tough Love* are the people who say it really helped them through rough times or that they related to it a lot. Also, when straight guys who would never normally read something about gay characters tell me that it made a difference in their opinions or made them think, that's really gratifying. The worst reaction I got was a complaint letter...that *Tough Love* was too violent and a bad example since it shows a character bashing back. The most stunning reactions were from actual suicidal gay teens."

Denson has never been to Portland before but notes that it "seems to have a great indie comics scene, and I've heard lots of great things, so I can't wait! Hopefully a lot of nice people will come out to say hi. I'm looking forward to meeting everybody!"

Finally, she has a message for queer and questioning kids: "Even when things are looking down...just keep going and...things will get better. Life goes on after high school, and the future is yours.... We included a resource guide in the back of the book for gay teens and teens who may be suicidal. Hopefully it will help people." ☐

ABBY DENSON discusses and signs *Tough Love: High School Confidential* 7:30 p.m. July 31 at Powell's on Hawthorne, 3723 S.E. Hawthorne Blvd.

ANDY MANGELS is a best-selling author and DVD special features producer who has also been working in the comic book scene for almost 20 years.