

From Mary Jane to Plain Janes

Highs and lows for women in comics

Cecil Castellucci is having a busy year. The young adult novelist — credited on the flap of her most recent book as a writer, filmmaker, actress and singer-songwriter — had two books come out in the last two months: *Beige*, a young adult novel, and *The Plain Janes*, the first book from a new DC Comics imprint, Minx. Minx, which kicked off with *Janes* in May, is “the first graphic novel imprint from a major American comic book publisher devoted to reaching the teenage girl.” It’s worth noting that DC partnered with Alloy Media + Marketing to create Minx; Alloy is the power behind *Gossip Girl* and *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants*, among other things.

Minx’s debut stirred up a lot of chatter in the blogosphere, but not nearly as much as the suggestive Mary Jane statue Sideshow Collectibles released the same month, which is somewhat telling. Major media outlets weighed in on the figurine,

which depicted a thong-baring, pearl-necklace-wearing MJ pulling Peter Parker’s Spidey costume out of a basket. Fangirls — and some boys — were annoyed, if not seriously pissed. (One of the most amusing responses was a drawing of Spiderman in the same position, clad only in a thong.) In *The Huffington Post*, Douglas Wolk wrote of the figurine and several recent comic covers, “They’re just sleazy, bad for business in the long term, and tacky as all hell, because their symbolic value is precisely that they do piss people off; there’s a snickering tone of ‘in your face, ladies!’ to all of them, and that’s their selling point.”

Wolk is dead on. The uproar wasn’t, as some people tried to claim, about one figurine; it was about the general boys’ club vibe of mainstream comics. The statue simply became a lightning rod.

So what’s Minx’s place in this boy-heavy comic book world? While it’s admirable for DC to actively try to appeal to young women, it’s hard not to feel — at least initially — that Minx is largely a marketing ploy. Putting aside the question of what’s already out there that appeals to teen girls (from Neil Gaiman’s *Sandman* to Brian K. Vaughan’s *Runaways* and a ton of independent comics in between), couldn’t they simply have released these books under the DC Comics imprint?

Maybe. Maybe not. The smaller-sized, black-and-white *Plain Janes* sits somewhere between indie comics’ personal stories and petite books of Japanese manga (of which DC also produces a line). And whatever the purpose behind the imprint, Castellucci’s debut makes a strong case for Minx’s future success. The story, beautifully illustrated in clean, hip, classy lines by Jim Rugg, follows a girl named Jane as her parents move her from Metro City to sub-

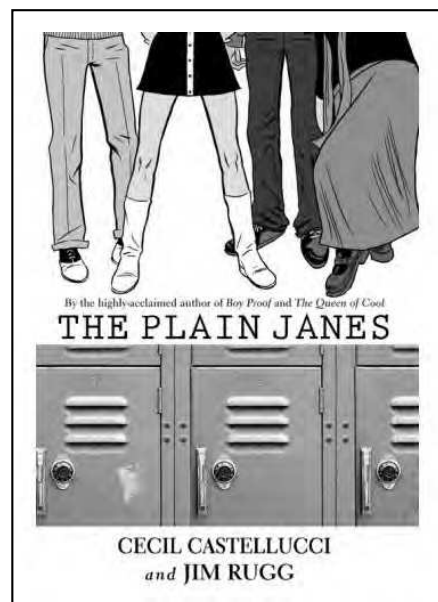


nesses and all. *Beige* is the story of a very normal girl who finds herself living with her punk rock father (whom she barely knows) in Los Angeles for a summer. Katy (dubbed Beige by her “temporary” friend Lake) doesn’t care about music and likes things to be tidy; she likes normal boys and posting comments to her friends’ blogs. It’s no surprise that Katy changes over her L.A. summer, but the gentle, careful way Castellucci depicts her change — feet dragging, heart breaking — is what makes *Beige* compelling. As is the other connection between these two books: the redemptive, beautiful, scary, awesome power of creating. Jane goes looking for something to create to make herself feel safe again; Katy finds a creative joy

when she’s not looking.

The Plain Janes is Castellucci’s first published graphic story; subsequent Minx titles are from a wide variety of creators (though not as many women as some critics would like). Cynicism about marketing ploys aside, the inspired, inspiring *Janes* is proof that Minx is a step in the right direction, just as last month’s Mary Jane uproar is proof (as if any were needed) that comics and their creators must consider the women of all ages in their audience. It’s serendipitous that Castellucci’s two recent books nearly go hand-in-hand; with any luck, Minx readers will cross over to the non-graphic section of the library for her other stuff — and vice versa. **EW**

For more about Minx titles, see www.dccomics.com/minx; for more from Cecil Castellucci, check out her blog at castellucci.livejournal.com



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