



Just So Happens

Fumio Obata

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'I still remember arriving in the city for the first time... It wasn't easy... But here, London, is my home.'

Yumiko is a young Japanese woman who has made London her home. She has a job, a boyfriend; Japan seems far away. Then, out of the blue, her brother calls to tell her that her father has died in a mountaineering accident.

Yumiko returns to Tokyo for the funeral and finds herself immersed in the rituals of Japanese life and death - and confronting a decision she hadn't expected to have to make.

Just So Happens is a graphic novel by a young artist and storyteller of rare talent. Fumio Obata's drawing, in particular, is marvellous in its power and delicacy.

Just So Happens Details

Date : Published February 13th 2014 by Jonathan Cape

ISBN : 9780224096638

Author : Fumio Obata

Format : Hardcover 160 pages

Genre : Sequential Art, Graphic Novels, Comics, Cultural, Japan, Fiction, Manga, Graphic Novels Comics

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From Reader Review Just So Happens for online ebook

George Marshall says

Gorgeous art- thin story. Start with the art, though, because that is what gets four stars: watercolours (a very hard medium to work with) and stunningly assured brushwork that is entirely suitable for the Japanese theme. I look at any single image and am astonished with the elegance and simplicity with which Obata conveys a pose or expression. Literally (and rarely true) every line is perfect, and never a mark more or less. Yumiko is feminine and pretty but has an ordinary, slim body which conveys femininity through posture more than curves, It is the hardest possible body type to draw, and Obata gives himself no respite by drawing her throughout in light clothing. For comics, which are surprisingly demanding in this regards, he achieves the perfect balance of detail and abstraction. I should say that the palette too is wonderful: muted browns- though the cover is lousy and gives no idea of the quality of what is inside.

Sadly the story does not match up. It is very gentle and lovely- and I admire Obata, a man, for writing so sympathetically for a woman character- but while it worked nicely for a short story (Going Back- submitted to the Observer competition) it never builds enough for a full book. It has some huge themes to hand- cultural differences, gender divides, family love, death and grief and sadly the light touch of the art becomes a light touch in the narrative. I would have liked much more of any one of these- especially the cultural aspects. He touches on the metaphor with Noh drama, but it is never taken further than a visual impression. Maybe Obata might have been better advised to keep with the tight short story format and produced other stories for the book.

Inevitably I also find myself comparing it with the Nao of Brown - weirdly another recent graphic novel in watercolour about a young Japanese woman living in London...is this a growing sub genre? The art, to my eyes, is ahead of Nao (though this was also outstanding) but Nao had more depth of character, themes, ideas and above all, humour -which earned it 5 stars in my book.

But how hard is it to write a great graphic novel? You need to do everything brilliantly- and Obata is clearly a great new talent.

Lauren says

Obata's story follows Yumiko, a Japanese woman living and working in London. She owns a design firm, is engaged to a British man, and extolls her love of the urban center for the first few frames of the book. Things quickly change when she receives a call from her brother that her father has died in an accident.

She travels back to Japan and unpacks some of her last memories with her father, leading up to her departure. Yumiko has this recurring vision of a character from a Noh theatre that follows her through town. The shadow character continues to visit her, seen in crowds, walking towards her on the street, etc. She is confused, but not necessarily scared of this vision. She visits her mother after her father's funeral and reads more about Noh theatre, and an interesting quote stands out:

...and within such sophistication and space, "self" becomes the obstacle...

I enjoyed the tone of the book, and the look into Japanese funerary practices and the concept of grief. Yumiko's family dynamic is so different than my own, so this was an enlightening read in that way. Obata's artwork was remarkable, and I liked the tone of the story.

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Book Riot Read Harder 2018 Challenge "A comic written and illustrated by the same person"

Fredrik Strömberg says

I've heard a lot about this graphic novel, and it mostly lived up to the hype.

The story is on the surface quite simple, about a young Japanese woman, who lives in London and has to go back to Japan because her father suddenly dies. There she is confronted with her old self and starts to think about her choices in life, all the while the funeral and all the little practical things that has to be done after a death has occurred, goes on around her.

The art is, as everyone seems to have noted, absolutely gorgeous. The characters are drawn with a light touch and the subdued watercolours are perfect to match the delicate artwork. Obata also excels in using small visual devices to transmit ideas of how the characters feel and experience a specific moment. My favourite was probably when the main character leaves London and walks through the airport, partly in a daze from the message that her father had died. The environments and the people around her is reduced to a blur, accentuating her feeling of loneliness and alienation.

The visual storytelling is otherwise mostly in the Western graphic novel tradition, though there are times when a distinct Asian influence can be felt (Obata is, just like the main character, a Japanese living in London), especially in the silent, more contemplative scenes. Sometimes these reminded me of the comics of Jiro Taniguchi, which is praise indeed.

The story is good, though not on the level of the art. It is a subtle tale of cultural differences, of finding yourself, and reconciling with your past, and as such it is deftly told. Just so happens is a moving tale, though not a groundbreaking graphic novel. Thus my giving it four stars, and not five which the art could have deserved. I will keep my eyes on Obata, though, as there is greatness in the making here.

Basma says

This story is about Yumiko, a Japanese who moves to London to pursue her dreams in design. She's having conflicting feelings about what it's like living in London, her life in Japan, what home is and what it feels like, her traditions and culture that she can't let go off and her inner conflicts that she hasn't made peace with yet. A tragic event happens in which she finds herself back in Japan and meets with her mother at the end of the trip to discuss some of what's going on in her mind. We see glimpses of what life looks like for some of her family members without getting to know much about them.

This felt like a nice, quiet and incomplete read. The art depicts the story very beautifully. Yet after each chapter or each end of a conversation I feel like there was a lot that was not expressed or voiced. We're left

feeling confused or filling in the gaps ourselves. Maybe that was the intention of the author or maybe that's what it's like for her and her family or that's what she's used to. I think this book could really do with a second part though because of all that was left unsaid. I'm curious and interested and even though there wasn't much said in terms of each of the characters story or even explanations on what's happening with the main character, there's still something that makes them intriguing to me.

Tiffany Lee says

After winning this book in a giveaway, I was quite excited to begin reading it since I would have a chance to delve deeper into my Japanese roots through reading. One of the reasons why I loved this book is because it truly depicted the beauty of the Japanese culture, from the ceremonies of death down to the behavior of the Japanese people overall. The mysterious customs of Noh theater was something that intrigued me throughout the course of the book, the occasional appearance of the masked figure foreshadowing her family roots that she longs to return to.

The art was one of the unique aspects of the graphic novel, the usage of water color bringing out the scenery of the bustling cities of London and the traditional, foreign-like feeling of Japan. Although I do believe that the book should have been more fully extended to the whereabouts of Yumiko after her trip to Japan, I would suggest this book to someone that would like to read a short story about the struggles that a young woman faces upon her ancestral roots and the death of her father.

Charlotte Jones says

I picked this up from the library. I've had my eye out for it since Mercedes from MercysBookishMusings mentioned it a few years ago and although I'm glad that I finally got an opportunity to read it, I have very mixed feelings.

On one hand, I found that the story jumped around quite a lot to a point where I sometimes felt that there were panels missing or something. I could follow the plot well enough but these jumps just took me out of the story and confused me at some points.

However, having said that, the artwork is probably the best I've ever come across in a graphic novel. The watercolour illustrations contained the perfect level of detail and colour without being too garish and it really evoked a sense of place.

I found this a sad read because it deals with the protagonist losing her father, a theme that hit very close to home for me and I feel that her emotions were portrayed very realistically.

On the whole, I feel that this could have been longer, with more panels being added throughout to flesh it out a little more. As I said, I have very mixed feelings but overall it definitely had an impact on me and I'm glad I picked it up.

Mobyskine says

Jalan cerita yang agak simple. Konflik keluarga yang biasa kita dengar sehari-hari. Saya kagum dengan

setiap ilustrasi cat air yang dilukis-- warna, tona dan brush strokes. Lawa.

Paling suka bila penulis/artist illustrates each scene properly, such detailing-- London scenery, Kyoto, the temple and even the restaurant scene. And one thing bila each crowd scene (waktu the main character wandering around town or lepak kat kedai makan) mesti ada one or two person yang came out sambil pakai topeng binatang atau karakter-- kepala batman, pinocchio (barangkali that guy yang tengah melepak kat kedai makan tu tengah cakap besar/menipu dekat kawan-kawan dia sampai hidung dia jadi 'panjang'), rusa, kucing and even there's a bear riding a bicycle. Comel gila!

Raina says

This book started really strong.

It's gorgeously produced - no page is without design or wasted, and the illustrations are just stunning. It hones into a fascinating conversation, between our protagonist and her significant other, and they roam the streets of London. He notices something about the way she interacts with a certain group of people, and she reacts negatively, disliking that he's "watching her" as she moves through the world.

As the story moves, and she travels to Japan, it gets more ethereal. We get a peek into her dreams. It's still illustrated beautifully - it just lost me, and I'm having a hard time even remembering the plot. You might fall head over heels more than I did, though.

Read with:

Turning Japanese by MariNaomi

Vietnamerica: A Family's Journey

The Nao of Brown

JumbleofJargon says

It was okay. Maybe a little less than okay. It felt like things were missing; like they skipped over big gaps in the plot or conversations with no warning. It didn't flow well. And I was a bit confused at times. I get she rejected her culture for a long time and finally accept it by the end but how she gets from point A to point B is unclear.

Ran says

The artwork is just so beautiful.

kb says

The watercolor art is absolutely gorgeous, and the themes explored (father-daughter, family, loss, leaving home, moving on) are easy to relate to. However, it might just be the Japanese way of finding the most important in the quiet spaces but I felt like I wanted more plot-wise.

Btw, here's a thread of books I've read this 2019 so far!

Jason says

Lovely illustrations create a calm and reflective reading experience, but I'm not exactly sure what the author is trying to express, or what kind of experience he is hoping we'll have. You close the book and think "Huh, That was nice" and you're not sure what to think after that.

Palimp says

Las mochilas familiares aparecen cuando menos te lo esperas, aunque lleves años viviendo en otro país, en otra cultura y estés perfectamente integrado en tu nuevo entorno. Una historia emotiva y muy bien contada.

Elizabeth A says

Can we ever really go home? How do we define home?

This graphic novel has wonderful sketchy watercolor (yes I just made up that word) art, and is quite lovely to look at. The story/plot however is so thin as to be almost transparent (pun intended). The questions asked are universal ones, especially for those of us who left home and now live in a country different from the one we were born and raised in. Yumiko was born in Japan, but now lives in London. Happily by all accounts, but when she learns of her father's death, she returns for the funeral, and is struck by the rituals of life in her birth country.

This story disappointingly does not explore deeply any of the various themes it could have, so while I really liked the art, this is not a book I'd recommend.

David Schaafsma says

Lovely, elegant art--pen and ink with watercolors--perfect for the quietly contemplative story of a Japanese woman living in London, who needs to go home to Japan for a family emergency. The action is not the point of the story, but what the return trip requires of her, to think back to her spiritual roots in Japan, her father and mother. It's an old question: Can you go home again? Yes, to visit, periodically, but can you actually return there? There isn't much more to the story, in a sense... a London boyfriend is part of it, a conversation with her mother, an encounter in dreams and in returning to places she grew up with Noh drama. There's spiritual and cultural and heritage issues at stake here. And the art is gorgeous. And as reviewer Geroge Marshall pointed out, it looks quite a bit like the also watercolored Nao of Brown which is also about a Japense woman living with a boyfriend in London, and about psychic struggles of another kind. Just So Happens (what kind of title is this?) as lovely and contemplative as it is, pleas in comparison to the literally more colorful Nao, and the story is just less engaging. It's more muted, all around, but worth a look. Very few graphic novels are this gorgeous to look at, in almost every single panel. The watercolor serves the story very well. Fumio, a Japanese male living in London, does a great job with this fictional story of a woman

who, like him, perhaps, needs to confront the cultural clashes, finally. Maybe all of us who have left home need to do this in our own ways.
