

Persepolis

A review by Heather Craig

I felt a little uninformed renting **Persepolis** as I haven't read the two graphic novels on which the movie is based. Everybody I know who loved the movie also loved the books. Well, I can't compare the movie to the books, but I can say wholeheartedly that **Persepolis** is a gripping story told in such creative animation that the visuals stay as interesting as the narration.

Not only are the visuals as interesting as the narration, but they are at least as important. Evoking the images in the graphic novel, the animation is like broad freehand drawings that move. These images change from somber black and white and then to vivid color, keeping the viewer enthralled as much in absorbing all of the detail on screen as in reading the English subtitles of sarcastic, often pithy narration (**Persepolis** is in French). In fact, my eyes became so accustomed to the black and white that when a burst of color shows us we're now in France, my eyes were so startled that they had to adjust.

Persepolis is the biographical story of Marjane Satrapi, a girl born into a liberal Iranian home during the time of the last Shah. Marjane's childhood was delightful, full of the love of her parents and her blunt but very sweet grandmother. It was also full of stories that fed her childlike need for adventure, stories about imprisoned and even executed relatives, friends, and heroes. Marjane's favorite hero however was Bruce Lee, and she had his poster on her wall. The voice of the now adult Marjane narrates the story.

The fall of the Shah meant the release of Marjane's Communist uncle from prison and he spent much time with his niece, telling her what a splendid, modern future was in store for Iran. Of course, Uncle Anouche's vision of Iran did not come to pass, and the story progresses with more and more rights being taken from everyone, suspicion rising among neighbors and friends, "undesirables" being removed from society, and the complete loss of status for women. Marjane does not give in to this loss easily and buys bootleg copies of American rock, a small rebellion that makes her feel better.

Young Marjane's fantasies and her own vision of what happened to her imprisoned uncle and other Iranian heroes are shown in quirky thought bubbles above the action, a story within a story that takes advantage of the living graphic novel technique this movie employs. This makes the visual experience of the movie so much deeper, and one is afraid to blink for fear of missing a little gem on screen.

Here, no attempt is made, as is usual in all American animation, to look three-dimensional. The drawings on screen could seem very flat but instead they seem to free the story from any imposition of correctness. The animation is limited only by the narrator's imagination, completely alive, as the drawings change from a surreal dream of an argument with God to a floating car, all capturing our heroine's mood and attitude.

I recently read the book *A Thousand Splendid Suns* by Khaled Hosseini, a wonderful if at times bleak story about two women in Afghanistan during the end of Russian occupation and the coming of the Taliban. While **Persepolis** is about Iran and not Afghanistan, there were unmistakable parallels that

made me think of the book, from the excitement about the end of the old regime to things being worse under the new government, especially for women.

However, Marjane's story, while an Iranian story, leaves Iran. Fearing for her safety in the downward spiral their country has become, Marjane's parents send the now teenage girl to a relative in France. She tries desperately to fit in among the anti-authority French crowd, but she knows at heart that these people have no idea what real oppression is. She bounces around residences in France, trying to find where she belongs, flinching at the common perception of what an Iranian is. She also grows up, falling into relationships, and going from shame to pride at her heritage.

While all this may sound quite grim, the movie is not depressing. This is not just a movie for those who have read **Persepolis** (I still haven't). This is a movie for those who enjoy a movie full of *joie de vivre* in the midst of turmoil. It celebrates the human spirit.