

Buddha Vols. 1-2

Buddha is not his real name. He was born Gautama (in Sanskrit) or Gotama (in Pali). Buddha is the past participle of the Sanskrit verb "to be enlightened" or "wise." Buddhism preceded Christianity by 500 years and Islam by 1100 and was the first international religion.

The English language publication of Osamu Tezuka's *Buddha* is a landmark publishing event in comics. The first two volumes — comprising over 800 pages — appeared in 2003. The comics biography will run to eight volumes and over 3,000 pages. Tezuka is well-known as the father of manga, as acclaimed and respected as Herge is in France or Jack Kirby is here (well, no American cartoonist is as esteemed in America as Tezuka or Herge are in their native lands, but you get the idea). And this is quite probably Tezuka's most ambitious and successful work available in English to date.

If a biography of Buddha strikes you as potentially somber or didactic, think again. Tezuka is first and foremost a storyteller and yarn-spinner; the narrative of *Buddha* moves like a freight train. Structurally, the story unfolds in the manner of a romantic children's adventure serial, the drawing is characterized by (among many other aspects) Tezuka's trademark gestural intensity, and the writing is colloquial and slightly melodramatic.

The first volume ("Kapilavastu") could be considered a preface — albeit, at 400 pages, the world's longest preface. Here we are introduced to the main characters (some of whom don't survive past volume 2) and their formal relationships and complicated moral outlooks. The slave Chapra, decent and likeable, compromises himself too severely in order to save his mother Budai; both lives end badly. There is Tatta, a skilled rogue and proletarian (the word would not be out of place in this context) who figures more prominently later in the life of Buddha. General Budai is an unlikable enforcer of ruthless power to whom Chapra opportunistically and ultimately, unsuccessfully, attaches himself. Most significantly,

Princess Maya gives birth to the child she names Siddhartha. The second volume ("the Four Encounters") traces Siddhartha's disenchantment with and rebellion against his luxurious surroundings and the caste system and the beginning of philosophical journey.

I was most impressed by Tezuka's absolute mastery of such a wide, almost contradictory, range of storytelling devices, all of which, counter-intuitively, cohere into a seamless and pleasurable whole. There is something fearless about his willingness to combine outlandishly cartoony exaggeration, beautifully tactile, naturalistic landscapes, abstract stylistic visualizations, elegant representational illustration, slapstick comedy, shocking acts of cruelty and violent bloodletting, serenity, and lymphatic exuberance. It all works and it's all held together by Tezuka's expressive, elastic, calligraphic line.

Tragedy and broad comedy are given roughly equal space without, somehow, sacrificing any of the genuine pathos or philosophical weight. One of the most bizarre scenes (from the second volume) is of Bandaka, an unscrupulous warrior, literally bouncing a plumb chambermaid across the floor ("I love chubby girls that I can bounce around like a beach ball." Eight pages later he is on the verge of victory against an attacking army when he's unexpectedly killed and Tezuka lingers on his death as he falls off a horse, a spear through his mouth and coming out the back of his head (reminding me of a similar

scene from the film *Deliverance*). Death takes on a particular poignancy, perhaps in contradistinction to the comedic elements. The five ascetics (again, in volume 2) who take on the task of cajoling Siddhartha down from meditating on top of a building are so grotesque and goony that they looked as if they were designed by Chester Gould. Yet Tezuka never breaks stride, the illusion never falters, and the crushing weight of human affairs is everywhere present. It's an amazing virtuoso performance — with more than 2,200 pages to go!

The full range of Tezuka's skills are in evidence on every page; it's as if he pulled out all the stops, used every arrow in his considerable aesthetic quiver, knowing that this would be his last major work (he died two years after its publication in Japan). ●

Gary Groth is the co-founder and Editor-In-Chief of *The Comics Journal*.

Osamu Tezuka

Vertical, Inc.

(Vol. 1) ISBN: 1932234438, \$24.95

(Vol. 2) ISBN: 1932234446, \$24.95

www.vertical-inc.com

APR 2004
THE
COMICS
JOURNAL

Below: The devious Bandaka hunts a very special horse in this panel from Osamu Tezuka's *Buddha* volume one.

