

# BOOKS

## Manga man

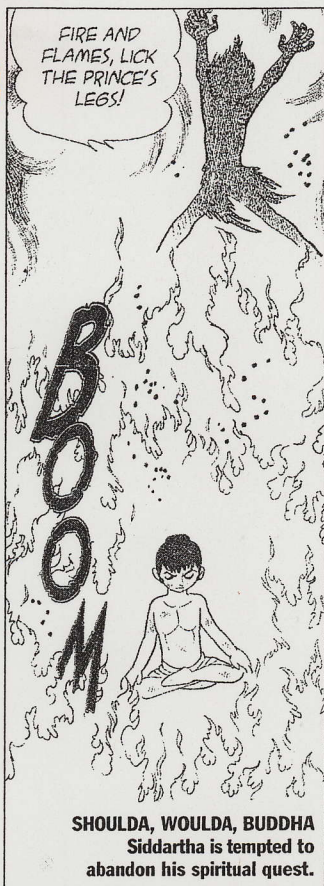
A Japanese comics master finally makes his American debut **By Lance Olsen**

**O**samu Tezuka is the undisputed heavyweight champion of the headbangingly popular comic books known

as manga. Born in 1928 in Osaka, Japan, he grew up on Walt Disney (he saw *Bambi* 80 times) and the Fleischer Brothers (Koko the Clown, Betty Boop, et al.), then topped them off with innovative German and French films during his medical-student days. He soon turned his back on medicine, and by the early 1950s, he dominated the manga scene. When he died of stomach cancer in 1989, Tezuka left behind more than 150,000 strips, several extraordinarily influential anime (*Astro Boy* is among the best known) and one manga masterpiece: *Buddha*, which sold more than 11 million copies when it debuted as a series in Japan three decades ago. The books are just now being released in the U.S.

Tezuka eschewed the flat, static representations found in traditional manga. In their place, he introduced such dynamic, cinematic techniques as multiple "camera" angles, close-ups and jump cuts. Rather than thinking of manga as simple stories that could be contained within a few panels, he conceived of them as sprawling narratives that could easily exceed 1,000 pages. He preserved traditional manga's iconoclastic impulse while adding serious themes to a genre already a lot more comfortable in its relationship to sexuality and bawdiness than American comics. The upshot is an art form that, at its best, rivals the novel in its structural complexity, character density and thematic sophistication.

Antecedents to contemporary manga (Japanese for "whimsical pictures") extend back more than a millennium to the *chojugiga*, satirical scrolls drawn by Buddhist monks in the 6th century, depicting anthropomorphic animals acting like less-than-model humans. But Tezuka, more than anyone, is responsible for the form's proliferation in the second half of the 20th century. By the mid-'90s, about 1.9 billion manga were sold each year in Japan alone.



**Buddha: Volume 1, Kapilavastu**

**Buddha: Volume 2: The Four Encounters**  
By Osamu Tezuka.  
Vertical, \$24.95 each.

That's nearly 40 percent of the country's books and magazines—or 15 manga for every man, woman and child. Given that statistic, what's remarkable is how few Americans are acquainted with Tezuka's work. Vertical, Inc., a two-year-old U.S. publisher of Japanese literature, has just published the first pair of eight volumes comprising the English version of *Buddha* in handsome, 6" x 8", 400-plus-page, black-and-white hardcovers. Four more volumes will follow next year, the last two in early 2005.

Siddhartha isn't born until three fourths of the way through the first

volume, *Kapilavastu*. Its dovetailing story, set in ancient Nepal and India, focuses instead on Chapra, a slave committed to moving up the social pecking order, and his growing friendship with Tatta, a smart-ass street urchin with magical powers. The second volume, *The Four Encounters*, follows Siddhartha as he grows from a frail, gloomy ten-year-old into an adult seeker who leaves his wife and child in search of enlightenment. Along the way, he becomes involved in a Rube Goldberg contraption of royal intrigues that intertwines his fortunes with those of a tough, sexy bandit named Migaila, a power-hungry archer named Bandaka and a wise, unnamed Brahmin.

Because the reader already knows the largest plot strokes before beginning the series, the real joy here lies in the journey—how the author portrays the well-known narrative—rather than the arrival. Tezuka, for instance, has reconfigured Siddhartha into a revolutionary, both of consciousness and society. He is obsessed with finding humankind's place in the cosmos and the cause of perpetual suffering in a universe of impermanence. But he is also continually striving to challenge and overturn the caste system and, by implication, the very notion of hierarchy. Siddhartha's education is as much about the importance of equality and altruism in society as it is about the recognition that death is the ultimate form of democracy for us all.

The exaggerated, sometimes creepily cute *echt*-manga characters—big-eyed, pug-nosed, spiky-haired—are set against an often meticulously drawn background reminiscent of Japanese landscape painting. In a series of metafictional sight gags, Tezuka himself makes Hitchcockian cameos while bit characters complain about the lack of color on the pages they inhabit. This tonal inconsistency, which serves to reinforce the story's theme of impermanence, is further underscored by characters vacillating between high diction and anachronistic street slang. **In Tezuka's world, the exquisite collapses into the goofy in a New York minute, the goofy into the melodramatic, the melodramatic into the brutal, and the brutal into the sincerely touching. The surprising result is a work wholly unique and downright fun.**

**Volumes 1 and 2 of *Buddha* are out now.**

## Reviews

### *Voyage to the End of the Room*

By Tibor Fischer.  
Counterpoint, \$23.

In this novel by British author Tibor Fischer (*Under the Skin*), an erotic dancer named Oceane, who grew up in her enormous London apartment, recently wealthy after a modeling gig became the popular video game), she uses her band Internet and satellite channels, and dishing out observations such as, "The predictability about th



alcohol and men." Their bizarre letters arrive from dead ex, Walter, interrupting her raphobic routine. What clever, exhausting whirlwind adventures, recounted in Oceane and a cy collector she hires to help down the letters' source.

The bulk of the novel is the months Oceane spent a live-sex show in Barcelona she met Walter. There, she workers spend evenings in S&M and days lounging in a rooftop pool, getting high and philosophizing: "Truly, boy fetishism are the new sandwiches," Oceane rereads as we become familiar with the jointed cast, they start dead, and Oceane flees when the killer is caught. We are transported to the Yugoslavian to Micronesia through a wacky anecdotes (vaguely reminiscent of Douglas Adams) designed only to impress their absurdity.

Fischer, who drew at himself several months ago in Martin Amis's *Yellow*. British press, fails to deliver the promise of his sharp heroic high-tech dilemmas. Liked docked cruise ship, *Voyage of the Room* teases us with pings of grand adventures going anywhere at all.

—Sheelah Kolhatkar

en 57th and 58th Sts (212-ay: N, R, W to Fifth -Sat 11am-6pm. Laura xt remember I had forgot-otographs of food in disar-the feast). Through Jan 17. center of

43rd St (212-857-0000). F, V to 42nd St-2, W, 42nd St S, 1, 2, 3, 9, 7 Sq. Tue-Thu 10am-5pm; at, Sun 10am-6pm. \$10, s\$7, members and children -8pm voluntary contribu-eeep: Changing Visions of More than 300 works, dat-9th century to the present, ays in which photography of identity and race. Nan dieta and Man Ray are hibited (see Reviews).

allery m Madison and Park Aves ue-Sat 11am-5pm. "Face-eps of iconic figures, in-el, Jackson Pollock and uy the postcard when you g? Through Feb 11.

z Gallery at 20th St, second floor Subway: C, E to 23rd St. pm; closed Thu 1. Joel scany: Inside the Light." is taken by Meyerowitz in the months he spent as the r granted full access to igh Jan 10.

Gallery en Fifth and Sixth Aves Subway: E, V to Fifth R, W to Fifth Ave-59th m-5:30pm; Sat 11am-Atget, "Hidden Spaces." photos in Paris during the e 20th century. Depicting urds and similarly hidden a less public side of Paris ork. Lois Conner, "To Be." men in the final stages of rough Jan 21.

een Madison and Park 212-759-7999. Subway: St. Tue-Fri 9:30am-1-6pm; "Shop Windows." window displays from ugene Atget, Lee Fried-Warhol. Through Jan 24.

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European ibration"

of Art, 200 Eastern Pkwy, Brooklyn (718-638-5000). tern Pkwy-Brooklyn Muse-um. Free. Medieval street avant-garde films, waltz s, plus the fourth annual ll featuring the Vienna ra. For more info, visit seum.org.

udio Students" Contemporary Art, 583 r Houston and Prince Sts Subway: C, E to Spring St to Broadway-Lafayette ce St. Sat 3 at 1 and 2pm. eniors \$3, children under free. Trailblazing experi-performances choreo-a Brown.

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