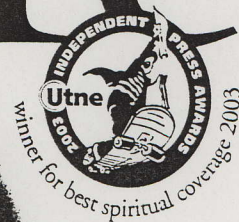


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Buddha: Volume One: Kapilavastu

Osamu Tezuka

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Comic books and spiritual pursuits may at first seem incongruous bedfellows, but there are many historical precedents. Jack Chick's tiny Christian evangelical comic pamphlets inadvertently put the "fun" in fundamentalism.



Long ago monks carved erotic bas reliefs in Hindu temples to attract lagging worshippers. There is a long history in India of cartoons portraying religious themes, and Marvel, one of the leading producers of superhero comics in America, once published a comic version of the life of Pope John Paul II.

So the new publication of the life of Buddha, in eight sprawling volumes by Osamu Tezuka, is not as odd an event as it might seem. In Japan, where Tezuka is revered as a master of comic art or *manga*, it isn't unusual for historical and religious themes to be portrayed in comic book form.

The first volume of *Buddha, Kapilavastu*, reveals the scope and detail that Tezuka gives to this massive saga. The young Prince Siddhartha is born only toward the end of the nearly four-hundred-page book. The stage for the birth of the Buddha is set using historical and fictional characters to establish the people's dissatisfaction with the caste system and the corruption among priests.

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The story begins with a young Brahmin priest being sent forth to seek the rumoured "great one." On his journey, he meets a slave who impossibly aspires to become one of the warrior caste and a pariah (who closely resembles Astro Boy from the cartoons) who has the ability to control the minds and bodies of animals. Through the struggles of these two members of the less-fortunate classes, the problems inherent in the caste system and the necessity for a new philosophy are clearly illustrated. Their quest culminates around Kapilavastu, the capital of the kingdom where supernatural events are foretelling the birth of the Buddha.

While *Buddha* is telling a sacred story, it is a comic book and therefore remains firmly rooted in the profane. Filled with exaggerated comic book humour and violence, the book also contains moments of sublime beauty and subtlety, both in the text and illustration. It is Tezuka's mastery as a storyteller and his deep respect for the subject matter that never lets vulgarity overwhelm the serious elements of the story.

The black and white cover design of *Buddha* is handled by über-designer Chip Kidd. The first hardcover volume, with its narrow colour strip of dust jacket over enlargements of Tezuka's drawings, is a beautiful object that left me coveting the remaining seven volumes for my bookshelf – a small irony considering that the life told therein is that of a man who encourages us to "end desire and so too end suffering." ॐ

– Joe Ollmann

