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Stuck Rubber Baby (New Edition)



Synopsis

The groundbreaking, award-winning semi-autobiographical graphic novel returns in a new edition featuring an introduction by Alison Bechdel, award-winning author of *Fun Home*. In the 1960s American South, a young gas-station attendant named Toland Polk is rejected from the Army draft for admitting to homosexual tendencies, and falls in with a close-knit group of young locals yearning to break from the conformity of their hometown through civil rights activism, folk music and upstart communalism of race-mixing, gay-friendly nightclubs. Toland's story is both deeply personal and epic in scope, as his search for identity plays out against the brutal fight over segregation, an unplanned pregnancy and small-town bigotry, aided by an unforgettable supporting cast. From the Trade Paperback edition.

Book Information

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Average Customer Review: 4.5 out of 5 stars [See all reviews](#) (28 customer reviews)

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Customer Reviews

The brevity of this review does not do justice to its importance in the history of graphic literature, but I find it difficult to talk about without divulging crucial plot elements. I will say however that it won the Eisner Award (the comic book equivalent of the Oscar) for best Graphic Album, and was nominated for both the American Library Association's Gay and Lesbian Book Award and the Lambda Literary Award. This story is set in Alabama during the early Sixties, and follows the life of Toland Polk, a white gay man who "comes out" to himself and others at the same time that he is becoming involved in the civil rights movement. Although based on the real life experiences of creator Howard Cruse (and others), he has embellished it enough to classify it as a work of

"fiction." One of the greatest aspects of the book, for me, was the two words on the cover that described "Stuck Rubber Baby" as simply "a novel." Of all the "graphic" novels I have read, no matter how well they were crafted or how much I enjoyed them, none left me feeling so much as though I had just finished a "real" book as this one did. Besides the obvious factor of Cruse's artistic and literary talent, I think this was due to the fact that "Stuck Rubber Baby" was written as a novel instead of being released in installments which were later collected in a book, and that it was rendered in black and white, lending it the same air of authority as more highly regarded works that make use solely of the written word. Ultimately, however, the personal insights into a seldom seen aspect of the civil rights movement's history shared in this work are most effecting precisely because of their presentation through the unique and powerful medium of "comics."

I expected to enjoy this graphic novel; I am squarely in the middle of the intended reader demographic, a 40 year old gay man that enjoys comics. I did NOT expect to find such real characters, real people, better developed and better realized than in any recent "regular" novel I have read. The clincher that this is a five star story? I passed it to my (heterosexual) brother to read, and he enjoyed it immensely. I believe the measure of a story should be that an unintended audience finds it as interesting or entertaining as the intended one, and in this circumstance, that was certainly the case. Well done, Mr. Cruse.

The average snoot wouldn't come within a mile of this book, for reasons which seem perfectly reasonable to snoots and are therefore entirely stupid. Some might react with horror to the curviness of the characters, which is in fact a strength of the story. The people who populate Stuck Rubber Baby do not share the perfection (or carefully controlled imperfection) of characters from other graphic novels. They are pudgy, fat, even unattractive. This is not a defect of the artwork; it is an essential feature. Real people do not have perfect bodies or souls, and this story is, above all else, very real -- almost distressingly so. Cruse does not fall into the too-easy trap of sanctifying his protagonists. The modern trend of antihero storytelling might make this sound less significant, but given the topics Cruse is handling, this is truly an accomplishment. All of them are ordinary people, who can (and do) make significant mistakes. Some of them recover from their errors, others do not... but everyone emerges significantly changed. Stuck Rubber Baby puts a convincing human face on an era that transformed America, and deserves a place on any well-stocked shelf.

Not all graphic novels live up to the "novel" part of that label, but "Stuck Rubber Baby" is an

exception. Its tale of a young gay man coming of age in the 1960s South, while also becoming involved in the civil rights movement, has all the richness & detail of a good novel. Even better, it never succumbs to preachiness, never becomes heavy-handed. Everyone has foibles & flaws, and even the more benighted, bigoted characters are three-dimensional human beings. So the regrettable accusation of a previous reviewer that this is nothing more than "gay rights propaganda" falls flat. I don't know how much of this story is autobiographical in nature, but it certainly feels that way. [Edit: And I see that Richard De Angelis' fine review confirms this.] Memory plays an important part here, recreating & exploring another time & place, one that's gone by in many ways. Yet as William Faulkner once said, "The past is not dead. It's not even past." The sense of living with the ghosts of previous decades is very strong. Impulsive actions have consequences, some of which live on & shape the unwritten course of the characters' adult lives. The art may not be for everyone, but it works beautifully for me. The cheerful, slightly exaggerated cartooniness really brings these people to life as individuals, rather than as stock figures. No impossibly idealized bodies & faces to be found here! Which is all to the good, as the emphasis is on ordinary people ... well, like us. In fact it's very easy to identify with young Toland Polk, whether you're gay or straight. He's a likeable, sympathetic guy - not overly noble, not entirely sure of himself, prone to make stupid mistakes at times -- in other words, quite embracingly human. I'm glad to see that this story is coming back into print, and in a hardcover edition, no less. Graphic novels like "Maus" & "Blankets" (for instance) are deservedly praised, but "Stuck Rubber Baby" seems to have flown under the radar of a lot of readers & critics. Maybe this new printing will help correct that at last. For me, it's a story that holds up over many re-readings -- most highly recommended!

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