

Adult Fiction

GRAPHIC NOVEL

**Black Jack, Volume I**

Osamu Tezuka

Vertical

Softcover \$16.95 (288pp)

978-1-934287-27-9

Black Jack, one of the best known pop culture characters in Japan, is also, oddly, the Osamu Tezuka creation perhaps most accessible to both Western and non-manga readers generally. And that's not the only odd thing about the eponymous anti-hero of these adventures. The world's foremost unlicensed surgeon, Black Jack is equal parts Mad Scientist, Gregory House, Phantom of the Opera, and Batman.

Indeed, the open-ended nature of his protagonist—a brilliant free agent who operates across geographical and social borders—allows Tezuka to create a rich gallery of grotesqueries. Some of these dozen tales are humorous, some touching, some simply horrifying. So if the offbeat is your thing when it comes to literature, graphic or otherwise, look no further. You'll meet, among many others, an eyebank recipient subject to disturbing visions, a malevolent “face sore,” and a painter named “Go Gan” who desperately needs a brain transplant.

Those familiar with Tezuka will find that *Black Jack* includes many of his perennial themes: heart-tugging parent-child relationships, a macabre treatment of social justice issues, and even a bodily stitched-together “innocent” à la *Astro Boy* and *Dororo*. Yet the reason this book could also serve as a perfect introduction to manga itself is that each twenty- to twenty-five-page story is self-contained and satisfying in its own right. While their order, selected by Tezuka for the definitive Japanese edition, does provide a rough narrative continuity, readers aren't committing themselves to an epic, multi-volume story. One result of the brisk pace, though, is that Tezuka is restrained from indulging in his trademark artistic flourishes. That means you won't find quite as many expansively detailed establishing shots or innovative page layouts as in his other works, but the economy of the storytelling is worth the trade-off: these stories can be devoured like popcorn.

Ostensibly a medical drama, *Black Jack* actually permits Tezuka to explore a variety of genres—science fiction, mystery/suspense, social drama, romance, and horror. Throughout, Black Jack himself remains largely aloof. In this respect, the episodes recall British secret agent TV series of the '60s, in which half the fun was seeing a new crop of colorful characters interact with our coolly detached loner. Like Gregory House, Black Jack's superior intellect and lack of

a personal life put him very much in the Sherlock Holmes mold—a vaguely misanthropic, vaguely deranged genius working on society's fringes. Join him or miss out on the fun. (September) *Peter Gutierrez*

LITERARY

**Father Meme**

Gerald Vizenor

University of New Mexico Press,

Hardcover \$21.95 (120pp)

978-0-8263-4515-8

Told from the difficult and rarely employed second-person point of view, Vizenor's story is one of altar boy abuse on a Native American reservation at the hands of the Catholic clergy. The narrator, a retired journalist and former altar boy, offers a captivating account of his rejection of victimization, a rejection which ends in the eventual killing of a priest.

Vizenor employs explicit prose and salient detailing not unlike creative nonfiction, and his is a story worthy of staunch attention, a story too arresting to ignore. From the arrival of Father Meme on the reservation to the planning and staging of the resistance known as the Fourteen Torments, the altar boys draw the reader in with a sense of shared suffering and outrage. Entangled with the universality of boyhood mischievousness are graphic tales of sexual abuse and unanswered cries for help. “The wicked priest was invulnerable, madame, and forever saved from criminal prosecution. Only some saints, demons, stray priests, certain spies, and presidents enjoy such aegis, patronage, and absolute immunity. Surely you can appreciate that sacrifice was the only remedy.” It is this notion, that of the invulnerability of the priest, that causes the altar boys to seize the reins of destiny and unequivocally end their abuse.

And yet, there is an ominous sense of doom surrounding the priest. His “coldness” is reiterated through descriptions such as his likeness to a “winter cannibal” and the inclusion of tales of masturbation over an icy fish hole. Winter is often used to suggest death, as in Robert Frost's “Stopping by the Woods on a Snowy Evening” or to suggest a lack of hope, like in C.S. Lewis' *The Lion, The Witch and The Wardrobe*. Father Meme symbolizes both the element of death and the hopelessness of the altar boys, a hopelessness doomed to continue as long as he is alive. “Father Meme is dead,” declares the narrator, “deservedly beaten and pushed under the ice.” It is a fitting end to a decidedly icy figure.

Gerald Vizenor, a Native American writer and member of the Minnesota Chippewa Tribe, has more than twenty-five books to his credit, including *Griever: An American Monkey King in China*. He is a recipient of the New York Fiction Collective Prize and an American Book Award.

Vizenor is a Distinguished Professor of American Studies at the University of New Mexico, and professor emeritus at the University of California, Berkeley. (October) *Shewanda Pugh Garner*

**Sima's Undergarments for Women**

Ilana Stanger-Ross

Overlook Press

Hardcover \$24.95 (320pp)

978-1-59020-089-6

A good story—like those written by Lorraine Hansbury or Amy Tan—invites the reader into an unfamiliar world. Ilana Stanger-Ross grew up in Brooklyn, which is also the location of her novel. Sima Goldner, a not-very-practicing Jewish woman in a Hasidic neighborhood, owns a shop in her basement and sells bras, panties, bustiers, robes—everything a woman needs for support and beauty. Able to recognize sizes 28A to 52K, Sima knows what her customers (almost all of them Orthodox women) need. But in a culture that values children more than almost anything else on earth, Sima is barren. Flashbacks reveal how she and her husband Lev, a retired teacher, tried to have children, and how Sima went through countless fertility tests. She failed, the marriage began to fail, and love dried up. Sima isn't even polite to Lev anymore. He hides in the newspaper.

And now Timna walks into Sima's shop. Timna is a beautiful Israeli tourist who is engaged to an Israeli soldier. Sima needs an assistant, and Timna needs a job. Sima falls head over heels in love. This is in no way lesbian love, however; it's the love of a lonely, meddlesome woman for beauty, life, and a surrogate child. Obsessed, Sima begins following Timna after she leaves the shop. For the first time in decades, she walks into other neighborhoods. She crosses the bridge into Manhattan and discovers that there's a whole world outside her basement. “Such a little shop,” the author writes toward the end of the book. “Linoleum floor, polyester curtain, wooden shelves....A hidden space, inconsequential, not even a pinprick on the borough map, but for [Sima], standing behind the counter with light coming through the one window, a whole world.” Sima is stepping into a brave new world.

Stanger-Ross has received prizes for her fiction, including a Timothy Findley Fellowship, and is currently a student-midwife on the University of British Columbia faculty. Her writing goes far beyond this Jewish neighborhood. It captures the universality of women's longing, of painful truths, of gossip and betrayal, of forgiveness, of youth and age. This novel, which takes place over the course of nine months, is hard to put down. At the beginning, Sima is bitter and Lev is silent. At the end, Timna is on her way to Los Angeles and Sima and Lev are on their way to a new beginning. (February) *Barbara Ardinger*