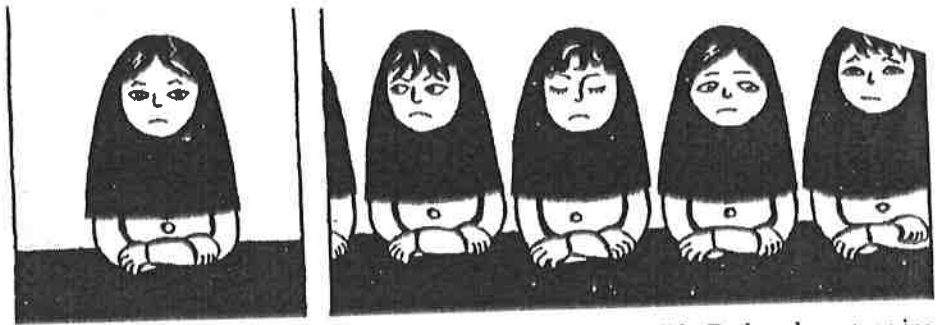


# Growing up graphic

by Debbie Notkin

**Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood** by Marjane Satrapi.

New York: Pantheon, 2003, 160 pp., \$17.95 hardcover.



In the second panel of *Persepolis*, Marjane Satrapi lets her readers know what we can expect from the rest of the book. The panel shows four little girls in Islamic veils, lined up in a neat little row. On the far left, we see the barest suggestion of a fifth girl. The text reads, in part, "This is a class photo. I'm sitting on the far left so you don't see me." Satrapi, like all autobiographers, controls what we see and how we see it; unlike many, however, she is extremely cognizant of her control and wants her readers to share her understanding. We are in good hands, and we know it at once.



A self-portrait by Marjane Satrapi.

middle-eastern story. A young girl with deep religious beliefs is thrown into the center of a fundamentalist revolution, which she sees through the lens provided by her progressive, rationalist family. A regime committed to pushing an entire populace into a fundamentalist worldview not only pushes this protagonist away from religion, but out of the country.

Despite the message of that second panel (which follows a panel of Satrapi by herself, in the center of the space) the story by no means renders Satrapi invisible. On the contrary: She is the unmistakable protagonist of

her own tale, visible in almost every panel, her voice the only storytelling voice. Yet, by cutting herself out of the "class photo," she begins with an unmistakable graphic reminder that, as she is literally marginalized throughout the story and beyond: as a child in her parents' home, as a progressive growing up during a fundamentalist takeover, as a woman in a man's world, as a rebellious teen in an environment where rebellion can be literally deadly.

Although her story once she leaves Iran is not the subject of this tale, we can be certain that she has been marginalized as the emigre she becomes at the

of its previous life. Rather than stopping their parties and card games, they simply increase their protective efforts. Satrapi's friends still manage to score cigarettes, to sneak out of class for hamburgers, to party when "punk rock is in": We cannot help but superimpose western teenagers in torn black t-shirts and cheek piercings on these fully-veiled Iranian teenagers. When Satrapi demands that her mother cover her for cutting class, and her mother refuses, she thinks "Dictator! You are the guardian of the revolution of this house!" Although Satrapi uses the cultural symbols of the Middle East, her phrase is not unlike the American teenager's "What makes you think you can run my life?"

*Persepolis* is by no means a "comic book," yet Satrapi's sense of humor pervades it just as it might pervade a prose work on a similar subject. None of the humor is without its pointed commentary, which often only makes it funnier. Here is Satrapi at age ten, laying out for her grandmother the laws she intends to promote when she becomes a prophet: "Rule Number Eight: No old person should have to suffer."

"In that case," says grandmother, "I'll be your first disciple. But tell me how you'll arrange for old people not to suffer."

"It will simply be forbidden," says Satrapi, spreading her arms in youthful confidence in the simplicity and clarity of it all.



Satrapi portrays growing up in a world that is changing so dramatically as to be both confusing and demanding. The bright, aware, compassionate child does not have an easy time of it. When the family maid falls in love with the son of the family next door, Satrapi's

As the fundamentalist regime tightens its grip, the ever-increasing dangers of the family's life are contrasted with a dogged attachment to normality. Readers get the impression that omnipresent danger forgotten or denied characterized Satrapi's girlhood. It is difficult to say whether this is a literary unwillingness to dwell in a constant sense of impending disaster or an accurate presentation of how people actually function under desperate circumstances.

Toward the end of the story, however, the tone changes dramatically. When Satrapi's street is bombed and her Jewish neighbors are killed, a completely black panel proclaims "No scream in the world could have relieved my suffering and my anger." The young woman who emerges from this experience is too angry to be afraid. Her parents, clearly fearing for the

gious young girl in his arms conveys a sense of the child's religious feelings at a visceral level.

*Persepolis* stands up well from a variety of different perspectives: It's a telling memoir of girlhood; an informative and empathic window into the life of Iranian progressives as the country shifted from a dictatorship of the greedy to a fundamentalist regime; and a graphic novel providing immediate impact. As such, the personal, the political, and the aesthetic are all well-represented, and all are given comparable weight.

Ironies abound in *Persepolis*. An Iranian woman from a leftist family uses the quintessentially western format of the graphic novel to tell an incontrovertibly

Iran is not the subject of this tale, we can be certain that she has been marginalized as the emigré she becomes at the end of the story, and as the cartoonist she currently is. She is both ironically aware and accepting of that marginalization, willing to acknowledge its funny side, without trivializing.

Satrapi's stark black-and-white illustrations rely mostly on static images: Only at a few junctures, notably in fantasy sequences where the young protagonist is comprehending the death and destruction around her, do we see much in the way of movement in the panels. Panels vary in size, but not in shape, and each is contained in a box; the form is conventional and simple.

demanding. The bright, aware, compassionate child does not have an easy time of it. When the family maid falls in love with the son of the family next door, Satrapi's parents' assumptions about class fall under their daughter's undamaged scrutiny. She cannot comprehend how her otherwise liberal, egalitarian parents can condemn the maid for ignoring class boundaries. The ten-year-old girl crawls into bed to console the teenaged maid: "When I went back to her room she was crying. We were not in the same social class but at least we were in the same bed."

Her uncle, a released political prisoner, comes to live with the Satrapis, and he and young Marji come to care deeply for one another. He gives her an only slightly prettified version of his story.

When Uncle Anoosh disappears, Satrapi's father tells her that he left the country without saying goodbye, but eventually admits that he has been returned to prison. She has one chance to visit him in jail before he is executed. Upon his death, in one of the book's most poignant moments, she bids farewell to the (unidentified) white-bearded god whom she had once seen as a protector.


Satrapi's mother is threatened on the street by fundamentalist men and, days later, wearing the veil is made compulsory for all women. The war with Iraq forces the family into basement shelters, strikes fear into the populace, elicits deeper fundamentalism from teachers and police, and brings a family of refugees into Satrapi's home. A friend's father gets 75 lashes for owning videocassettes, a deck of cards, and a chess set.

Yet, somehow, the family continues to live a surprisingly "normal" simulacrum

anger." The young woman who emerges from this experience is too angry to be afraid. Her parents, clearly fearing for the life of their passionate daughter, arrange for her to leave the country, preferring to give her up and to send her to live in exile rather than to take the risk of keeping her at home.

Their reasons for not leaving with her are not addressed—perhaps the question didn't occur to the 14-year-old Satrapi. The sequence as she prepares to leave her home for Austria is deeply moving. The final panel is a testament to the emotional impact of a well-done graphic novel; it simply cannot be duplicated in prose.

In her preface, Satrapi says, "I believe that an entire nation should not be judged by the wrongdoings of a few extremists. I didn't want those Iranians who lost their lives ... to be forgotten." In the end, however, this is only one of many levels on which the reader experiences this story. Whether the preconceptions you bring to this book are about Iran, teenage girls, fundamentalist regimes, graphic novels, or all of the above, Satrapi's

unswerving commitment to the complex truth over the comfortable platitude will shake your expectations and eventually satisfy you in a new way. 

Marjane Satrapi



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