

Amy Biancolli, "Persepolis: Artwork just as Arresting as Story," *Houston Chronicle*, Jan. 25, 2008

Most authors have little control over movie adaptations of their books. Only the lucky and the skilled can write the screenplay themselves, much less have a hand in directing. But Marjane Satrapi has gone one better in bringing *Persepolis* to the screen: She drew it herself.

With help. Her co-director and co-screenwriter is Vincent Paronnaud, also known as Winschluss, an award-winning French underground comic artist (*Wizz and Buzz*). Together they've made a film as personal and eccentric as Satrapi's original book, a black-and-white, hand-drawn memoir of growing up and away from Iran. The movie's artwork is just as arresting, more so as it whorls and transforms along with Satrapi's childhood imaginings. And its emotional sum is, if possible, even more affecting. It moves. Reading a graphic book - Satrapi herself avoids that term, preferring the less-phony "comics" - exercises a different set of muscles from reading conventional prose. It forces you to think with your eyes, to glean truth and beauty from cramped planar shadings. Dialogue might crawl around an image, exposition might scroll through a frame, but text isn't the point. And words aren't everything.

The only problem with most movies based on graphic novels (*300*, for instance) is their prevalence of hyper-computerized visuals. They tend to look airless, as though everything's been clicked and dragged and digitized to a fine sheen, untouched by flesh and blood. With *Persepolis* the human touch prevails. No 3D. No pixels. No hundreds-strong phalanx of animators. Just a woman, her pen and her honest, funny, often heartbreaking recollections of youth: first under the Shah, later under the Ayatollahs. What her book and her film capture so vividly is the bafflement of educated Iranians who worked against the Shah, suffered under the Shah, sometimes died under the Shah and celebrated when the Shah was overthrown - only to suffer worse horrors under the new regime.

Satrapi chronicles this turn from oppression to euphoria and back again with her monochromatic drawings colored by hindsight: her girlish late-night chats with a magnificently bearded God; her sobering visits with a beloved and persecuted uncle (voiced by François Jerosme); or her teenage obsessions with western music (Iron Maiden) and fashion (Nikes), both of them pursued under the veil imposed by a newly fundamentalist order.

Persepolis follows young Marjane from age to age and continent to continent as she tries identities on for size. She's a punk nihilist in one chapter, an embittered young wife in another. (Voiced in childhood by Gabrielle Lopes, Marjane is played in later years by Chiara Mastroianni - the daughter of Marcello Mastroianni and Catherine Deneuve. And that's Deneuve voicing her grandmother in the film).

But if self-invention is the business of living, it's even more the stuff of autobiography: Memoir is a means to comprehend and shape the past, to pinch it and mold it until the whole thing coheres. In Satrapi's case, her quest to understand the past is a matter of reconciling her Iranian childhood with her expatriate's disconnect from the nation's recent history. She is a woman without a country. The film's exquisite black-and-white animation gives way to color only in flash-forwards to an older, wiser, lonelier Satrapi in a Paris airport. These scenes look strangely earthbound next those inky and ethereal memories of her Uncle Anoush in prison, of her grandmother snuggling in bed. It's grandma who tells Marjane to "be true to yourself," and it's she who hovers over *Persepolis* like a plump and beneficent ghost. In the image that lingers above all in this fine, lovely and challenging film, the old woman unsnaps her bra and lets it drop. The gesture sends forth a shower of flower petals, her perfume of choice. And I can just smell the jasmine.