

Nick Pinkerton, "This Girl's Life: The Islamic Revolution, and Puberty, Through the 2D Eyes of Marjane Satrapi," *Village Voice*, December 11, 2007

Persepolis is a small landmark in feature animation. Not because of technical innovation—though it moves fluidly enough, and its drawings have a handcrafted charm forgotten in the era of the cross-promoted-to-saturation CGI-'toon juggernauts—but because it translates a sensitive, introspective, true-to-life, "adult" comic story into moving pictures. While Robert Crumb only achieved the big screen as a porno-groovy shadow of himself and Daniel Clowes decamped to live-action, Marjane Satrapi's made the crossing; with the aide of French comic-book artist Vincent "Winchluss" Paronnaud (both making their first feature here), Satrapi's four autobiographical *Persepolis* volumes have been smartly streamlined and storyboarded into 95 minutes of screen time.

We first meet little Marjane (voiced by Gabrielle Lopes) in 1978. A rambunctious Bruce Lee acolyte, she's the mouthy only child of a progressive Tehran family anxiously watching their shah's repressive government give way to the ayatollah's far worse fundamentalist revolution. The state of the nation steadily carries on its bad-to-badder momentum through the mid-'80s, and to protect their daughter from the escalating war with Iraq, Marjane's parents send the now-adolescent girl (at this point voiced by Chiara Mastroianni) into exile at a Viennese Lycée Française. Until then, Marjane's personal history naturally overlaps with her country's (her bedroom, where she violently headbangs to Iron Maiden, morphs into the border's battlefields). But once abroad and displaced from the culture that had nourished her, however, the wider world recedes, and teenage Marjane's focus turns inward—she's victimized by boys and by her alien pubescent body, and she starts freely sampling subcultures in an attempt to re-establish her sense of self. The film's latter chapters bring her home for the university years, where the strictures of Islamic law have pulled even tighter.

Though the *Persepolis* comix carried the up-market "Graphic Novel" tag, there's nothing obscure or "difficult" about the film they became. The characters are downright cute, rendered in a clean, comfortingly rounded line. The comic relief tends toward doofy, broad crowd-pleasers (e.g., a leg-humping pet pooch and a rambunctious scene of renewed self-determination scored to a tunelessly warbled "Eye of the Tiger"). Sentiment and nostalgia are unabashedly indulged—Marjane isn't quite addressing "Somewhere Out There" to the night sky, but many a scene open-ends onto a lingeringly poignant coda (the emotion, I should say, never feels chintzy). An especial dreaminess is reserved for the privileged memories of the elder generation's lost, lovely sartorial habits—a newly liberated uncle's gift to Marjane of a swan made from prison bread crumbs; a beloved grandmother's habit of filling her bra with jasmine petals—reminders of a once-poetic national character too delicate to weather the changing times.

Our heroine's early girlhood is marked by this imperiled sense of enchantment, as the movie uses an imaginative kid's tendency to color the world with make-believe as a license for expressionistic ornament. Dancing marionettes illustrate to Marjane how British interlopers propped up the shah; a recounted escape from government persecution takes on the quality of a fable.

Satrapi and Paronnaud say they were inspired in part by silent-era German Expressionism, which is evident in the film's dynamic gouges of black; some of their most striking scenes are in silhouette, suggesting Lotte Reiniger's lacework-detailed Orientalist animation of the '20s. *Persepolis*, hand-penned by a team in Satrapi's adopted home of Paris, is almost entirely black-and-white—the exception is a framing device that finds a grown-up expatriate Marjane reminiscing from Orly airport. The books were largely drawn in pure China-ink simplicity, but the film is ambitious with effects. As fundamentalism lowers its pall over Tehran, *Persepolis*

imparts the cultural sea change with a schoolyard of upturned girl's faces in an inky ocean of newly imposed cloaks and headdresses; when little Marjane, punked-out inasmuch as Islamic law will allow, is accosted on the street by two female zealots, the women appear lamia-like, solid black bodies coiling around their prey.

The guts of the thing, though, are in Satrapi's embroidery of quotidian details: the thrill of scoring contraband Western pop off the streets; the routine absurdity of a university "Life Drawing" class where all that's exposed is the model's face, the rest concealed under a tent of *hijab*; the smuggling of illegal homemade wine into house parties that could turn fatal with a knock on the door; the horny teenagers recruited into martyrdom with government-issued plastic keys to a Live Nude Girls "Paradise" (that capacity for make-believe gone very awry). The accessibility of her firsthand address—how Satrapi refits epic national tragedy to an identifiably personal scale—has made *Persepolis* college curriculum and its maker something of a spokeswoman. She's even earned a tribute of sorts from back home. Her movie's Jury Prize-winning stand at Cannes got a response from an Iranian government-affiliated cultural foundation; the film stands accused of presenting "an unrealistic face of the achievements and results of the glorious Islamic Revolution."