

**Tasha Robinson, “‘Persepolis’: Surviving the Revolution Within, Without,” *The Chicago Tribune*, Jan. 18, 2008, [http://chicago.metromix.com/movies/movie\\_review/movie-review-persepolis/286248/content](http://chicago.metromix.com/movies/movie_review/movie-review-persepolis/286248/content)**

In her internationally best-selling graphic-novel autobiographies, “Persepolis” and “Persepolis 2,” Paris-based artist Marjane Satrapi isn’t kind to herself. As a young child in Tehran in the late ’70s and early ’80s under the Shah, she’s an arrogant girl whose loudly proclaimed political convictions far outstrip her understanding of current events. Following the Islamic Revolution and the rise of a fundamentalist state, she’s a rebellious and abrasive teenager, quick to follow trends but just as quick to flee the consequences. Sent to safety in Vienna by her worried parents, she’s judgmental, apathetic and self-absorbed, wallowing in despair after a relationship goes wrong. Satrapi’s books reported on all these personal failings without excuse, rendering them in stark black-and-white art that proved as inflexible and uncompromising as her own younger self.

The masterful film adaptation of her autobiographies loses none of these qualities. It’s still starkly rendered in crisp black-and-white, apart from color framing segments. And it still presents Satrapi with all her childhood flaws intact, as she struggles as much with her own gradually developing emotional maturity as with Iran’s political upheaval.

But at the same time, the animated film version brings all the story’s humanity gently to the surface. Just by giving the characters warm, mobile faces and expressive voices (Satrapi herself is voiced by different people at different ages; veteran actors Catherine Deneuve and Simon Abkarian voice her parents), Satrapi and her writing/directing partner, French animator/artist Vincent Paronnaud, expand the sense of Satrapi’s world significantly. At the same time, without significantly changing the books’ content, they bring in a wealth of emotional tones—particularly a playful, wry humor.

Not that Satrapi’s story lacked humor the first time around. Her appalled yet amused self-effacement is part of the charm of her work. But in the film version, all the emotions come across more vividly and more effortlessly. Giddy interludes like a pocket history of the Shah’s regime, presented as a stylized animated puppet-show, or the young Satrapi’s snappy conversations with a stylized, bearded, cloud-borne God, come across as broad and impish. The film never pushes hard for laughs, but its sense of visual fun leavens the seriousness of Satrapi’s topics.

“Persepolis” is Satrapi’s first film project and Paronnaud’s first full-length feature. They went into it with high ideals about humanizing Iranians for an audience potentially lost in Western visions of fundamentalists, extremists and the Axis Of Evil, but they also had less lofty but still firm beliefs about craft. Specifically, they wanted to produce a hand-drawn traditional feature instead of a live-action project that would make the characters less iconic, or a CGI movie that might lose the rough simplicity of Satrapi’s art.

But in spite of all the idealistic baggage, their film feels like it’s traveling light. The fluid handmade visuals hang onto the uniqueness of Satrapi’s heavy-lined work while giving them a smoothness and a visual depth they previously lacked. The backgrounds are rich in detail, taken from photo references of Tehran and Vienna, but the characters remain appealingly cartoony—the young Marjane Satrapi almost looks like a lost “Peanuts” character. But most importantly, the film keeps the book’s anecdote-driven, light personal touch.

The story does cover the history of Iran from the ’70s to the ’90s, but it largely sticks to a ground-level perspective that examines how political flux affects one family, and even more so, one often-frivolous, often-selfish girl. At times, that approach seems a little too choppy and trivial, and it can be difficult to sympathize with Satrapi’s adolescent pains when her countrymen are enduring so much more.

But it’s still easy to get caught up in Satrapi’s world as she tries to come to terms with herself and with an

identity that includes—but isn't necessarily defined by—her origins in a country where family members were executed for their political beliefs, where wearing cosmetics is a crime and where concerned parents show their love by sending their daughters to a foreign land to experience a whole new series of foreign problems. Part of the reason "Persepolis" works so well—as biography as well as an entertaining, absorbing, punchy narrative—is that it keeps its focus small, and it doesn't flinch from anything it finds under the microscope. In Satrapi's view, it seems, the only real shame would be in not acknowledging the past, in all its ugly detail.