

A. O. Scott, "In a Flat World, a Rebel With a Cause," *New York Times*, December 25, 2007

<http://www.nytimes.com/2007/12/25/arts/25pers.html?scp=2&sq=persepolis&st=nyt>

"Persepolis" is a simple story told by simple means. Like Marjane Satrapi's book, on which it is based, the film, directed by Ms. Satrapi and Vincent Paronnaud, consists essentially of a series of monochrome drawings, their bold black lines washed with nuances of gray. The pictures are arranged into the chronicle of a young girl's coming of age in difficult times, a tale that unfolds with such grace, intelligence and charm that you almost take the wondrous aspects of its execution for granted.

In this age of Pixar and "Shrek," it is good to be reminded that animation is rooted not in any particular technique, but in the impulse to bring static images to life. And "Persepolis," austere as it may look, is full of warmth and surprise, alive with humor and a fierce independence of spirit. Its flat, stylized depiction of the world — the streets and buildings of Tehran and Vienna in particular — turns geography into poetry.

If "Persepolis" had been a conventional memoir rather than a graphic novel, Ms. Satrapi's account of her youth in pre- and post-revolutionary Iran would not have been quite as moving or as marvelous. Similarly, if the movie version had been conventionally cast and acted, it would inevitably have seemed less magical as well as less real.

It would also probably not have starred Chiara Mastroianni, Catherine Deneuve and Danielle Darrieux, the three formidable French actresses who give voice to young Marjane, her mother and her grandmother. Sony Pictures Classics, which is releasing "Persepolis" in the United States, could easily have dubbed it into English, a change that might have broadened the film's appeal for a subtitle-phobic American audience. But then we would have missed the music of those incomparable movie star voices, and also a delightful parallel between cast and characters. Ms. Deneuve is Ms. Mastroianni's mother in real life, and Ms. Darrieux played Ms. Deneuve's mother in "The Young Girls of Rochefort" 40 years ago.

Ms. Darrieux's Grandma is the sturdy matriarchal anchor of "Persepolis," a source of humor, advice and moral guidance for young Marjane, and also an embodiment of the film's no-nonsense feminism. Like her grandmother, Marjane is a natural rebel, someone who takes freedom as her birthright and dares the world to challenge her.

Needless to say, the world obliges. Marjane grows up in a family of left-wing intellectuals who suffer first under the Shah's dictatorship and then, as the triumphant Islamic revolutionaries turn on their secular allies, under the rule of the mullahs. This political history, which includes war, torture and execution, is conveyed with impressive economy and visual wit. The beards of male religious zealots — and the chadors of their female counterparts — are like black holes in the screen, sucking away the light. (Later, during Marjane's exile in Vienna, a straying boyfriend is transformed from an angel-headed paragon into a sniveling, buck-toothed cretin.)

Against the forces of intolerance and superstition, Marjane, following her grandmother's example, takes an impetuous stand as a champion of enlightenment. Though she is self-confident and sometimes a little self-righteous, Ms. Satrapi doesn't wrap herself in heroism. The political

dimensions of her story are as clear and bold as her graphic style, but “Persepolis” traffics more in feelings than in slogans, and dwells most persuasively on the uncertainty and ambivalence of adolescence.

Fearing for her safety in a time of war and political repression, Marjane’s parents (her father is voiced by Simon Abkarian) send her to Austria, and the alienation she experiences there is a sad counterpart to the anxiety of Tehran. She loses herself for a while in punk rock and other alternative pleasures, but finds little to sustain her in the easy nihilism of European alternative culture. And it is in Vienna that the full pathos of her situation becomes clear, a dilemma that is hardly hers alone. Either she can be more or less free and give up her home, or she can return home at the cost of her freedom and individuality.

“Persepolis” dramatizes this dilemma without forcing it into an easy or sentimental resolution. While the character of her younger self sometimes slips into depression or dramatic behavior, Ms. Satrapi, as a writer and filmmaker, seems utterly devoid of self-pity. Grandma, whose life was long, difficult and rich, clearly had no time for such indulgences, and it is not hard to see that Marjane lived up to her example.

“Persepolis” is frequently somber, but it is also whimsical and daring, a perfect expression of the imagination’s resistance to the literal-minded and the power-mad, who insist that the world can be seen only in black and white.

“Persepolis” is rated PG-13 (Parents strongly cautioned). It has some scenes of violence and sexuality, for the most part discreetly and obliquely drawn.