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Girl Genius Volume 1: Agatha Heterodyne & The Beetleburg Clank



Synopsis

In a time when the Industrial Revolution has become an all-out war, Mad Science rules the World... with mixed success. At Transylvania Polygnostic University, Agatha Clay is a student with trouble concentrating and rotten luck. Dedicated to her studies but unable to build anything that actually works, she seems destined for a lackluster career as a minor lab assistant. But when the University is overthrown, a strange "clank" stalks the streets and it begins to look like Agatha might carry a spark of Mad Science after all.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Mostly, when you see the phrase "fun for all" it really means "fun for nobody", but that does not apply here. The Foglios' illustrations and writing are vivid & joyous, and their sense of humor displays minds born with the belief that "the world is mad, so why not enjoy it?" Clever riffs on the old Universal Horror classics mix with wild sight gags & a great fondness for the spectacular in their work. There's a plot, too. That's always nice. The Hipster gives it a Big Thumbs UP!

Agatha Clay is a young woman with a mysterious past. She lives in a world complicated by Sparks (think mad scientists with the ability to create devices and living things that bend or break the known laws of science) and ruled by Baron Wulfenbach, a Spark who conquered Europe to stop the chaos. Agatha's doesn't know her origin or about her imminent Sparkhood. When a mugging and theft allows her talents to break loose without warning, all hell begins to break loose, too. Girl Genius is

beautifully drawn and wonderfully manic. Its characters are human, animal, robotic (called Clanks), and artificial biological constructs. The huge story includes Agatha, the Baron and his son Gilgamesh (himself a developing spark), the King of Cats, Jagermonsters, pirates, the most fearsome nanny in the known universe, a traveling circus, Transylvania Polygnostic University, various monsters, and Punch and Judy. The backstory underlying it is fascinating, imaginative, and enormously detailed. The villains are not totally evil, and the good have their dark sides, but don't take any of it too seriously. This is comedy that is both broad and pointed, and it works beautifully. This comic is a whacko masterpiece of adventure, romance, and discovery. After fifty years of reading all sorts of comics, this is now my all-time favorite.

This is the first volume in Phil Foglio's ongoing series featuring Agatha Heterodyne and a cast of hundreds. The book collects the first few issues of what was originally a comic book series. The publishing schedule, though, seems to have been troubled for a variety of reasons, and "Girl Genius" now appears in webcomic form (with ensuing regular compilations in print form). Kaja Foglio, wife and co-creator, describes this as "gaslamp fantasy": crypto-Victorian science and pre-pulp adventures in a world filled with mad scientists, giant steam-powered robots, weird technology, mysterious cults, and cackling villains. A great deal of which is played for laughs, simultaneously embracing and sending up the usual tropes of the genre. The humor throughout balances between sly drollery and slapstick. One of the major attractions is Foglio's art, which many gamers will well know from his years of penning the "Phil & Dixie" feature in "Dragon" magazine. It's drenched in color and is highly detailed, to the point that you wonder how he ever completes a page. There's almost always 18 different things going on in the background, none of which is ever really relevant, but Foglio apparently really enjoys jamming in the sight gags. I'm a sucker for this kind of stuff, and the Foglios have done a great job in creating an internally consistent alterna-Earth with its own physical and magical laws and history and politics, and they've also introduced seemingly dozens of plot strands. This latter is both good and bad. In later issues, there is some loss of cohesiveness, and the story seems to wander off into side treks, and none of the storylines ever seem to get wrapped up. (It's sort of the "Lost" of the comics world.) On the other hand, it's got enormous fleets of dirigibles! And scar-faced pseudo-Teutonic bad guys! And talking cats! And endangered heroines in corsets! So, you know, all of the good stuff. Check it out!

Anyone who writes will tell you that writing comedy is hard. Foglio has a history of writing brilliantly whimsical sci-fi comedy (the Buck Godot stories), and erotic comedy (XXXenophile). He's done it

again with this inventive steampunk comic. In the Heterodyne universe Mad Scientists (called "Sparks") use bizarre technology to whip up fish flensing robots of doom in a matter of minutes. (They're effectively wizards in a technology setting). The heroine, Agatha Clay, is a late blooming but incredibly powerful spark who may destabilize an already tottering Europe. Agatha is fun: she's plucky, smart, and just a bit insane at times. All Foglio women are gorgeous, and Agatha is no exception. But her beauty is incidental to her brains in the storyline. In general the characters are complex, with heroic despots and maniacal heroes. As with Foglio, the backgrounds are intricate, detailed and often very, very funny. The steampunk setting is beautifully rendered, in a world where everything, from microscopes to zeppelins, is ornamented and elaborate. Its worth rereading just to look at the backgrounds. The storyline is also intricate, and is not resolved in this volume. However, Foglio has a knack for weaving complicated plotlines that resolve elegantly, and I am sure that this series will eventually do the same. This collection includes just the first few black and white stories. The subsequent ones are now in color. As of 7/1/04 we're up to issue 11, so there will probably be more collections to come.

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