

BOOKS

**Paping vol. 16: The Teacher's Edition**

John Mejias

80 pages • \$10.00

www.paping.org

The first thing you notice about this collection of teaching stories is, obviously, the cover. A gorgeous hand-screened three-color cityscape, where all the angles are skewed and everything is cramped and almost claustrophobic. It sets the tone for these comics quite nicely. John has made a compilation of some of his previous comics about teaching art in elementary schools in predominantly poorer areas of New York, which are bound to be eye-opening to some. The interior indicia lists the summary for library purposes as "Teacher Discovers Poor People Get Ripped Off At School," and that sums up a good chunk of this. The ridiculous bullshit he had to put up with just for attempting to teach kids that art isn't copying what the teacher tells you, to let them open up and *really* learn what art means to them, is astounding.

This is a project that is extremely personal, and you can tell. The expressive art style fits the book perfectly. Honestly, I wouldn't expect any less from someone who obviously cares about democratizing art, as well as breaking down the walls of ignorance in public education. The sequence of events involving painting murals on unused portions of the school alone will make you want to punch the next school administrator you meet. Reading this makes you really feel for what he's doing with this project, and, because of this, is something every potential faculty member should read to see what goes on with one of the teachers out there who really cares about making a difference—it's not easy.

There are numerous high points here, with my favorites being a rundown of what bands his young students like and don't like ("Don't play the Dickies if Akio tells you he hasn't taken his medication"—priceless.) as well as the sweet story about connecting with a learning-disabled student who couldn't fit in with what everyone around her was telling her to do/be through the simple glory of a swing-set. There are also a few guest sections, a comic made by a very young student coping with the loss of a beloved administrator/psychologist, a section done by the book designer detailing his travails as an unsuspecting Taiwanese student starting the third grade in Queens, and a story by a fellow teacher about seeing the home life of one of her students. These are also touching in their own ways, and I enjoyed them all.

Overall, this is a quality project that I suggest for everyone interested in the results based climate of current American education, as well as the fucked-up school dynamics that most adults forget. It is well made and pure intentioned. The only negative I can think of is that it is a compilation—I would really like to see what the original issues looked like (screen printed on wallpaper samples? Great idea!), as I personally love the short-run, handmade zines/comics of this ilk. Move on this one, there's only a thousand, hand-numbered.

—Joe Soares

**Nina**

Blag Dahlia

111 pages • \$9.95

Scapegoat Publishing

www.scapegoatpublishing.com

Wow! Blag Dahlia really pushes the envelope with his new book! Imagine, a book about a teenage girl who is...a sociopath! If this was 1980, I might be impressed.

Maybe it's a generational thing—the band that would become the Dwarves formed when I was 6—but I'm just not shocked very much by this sort of thing. I mean, the idea of writing a book about a teenage girl who doesn't know what right and wrong are, who has sex and steals things and whatever, is fine...but holy shit, every chapter is exactly the fucking same. Here's the formula: Nina goes somewhere and either A) Has sex with somebody way older, way younger, or (gasp!) a girl, B) Somebody gets hurt, dies, or gets fired because of her, or C) Both, and then the chapter is summed up merrily with a paragraph that has little or nothing to do with the story.

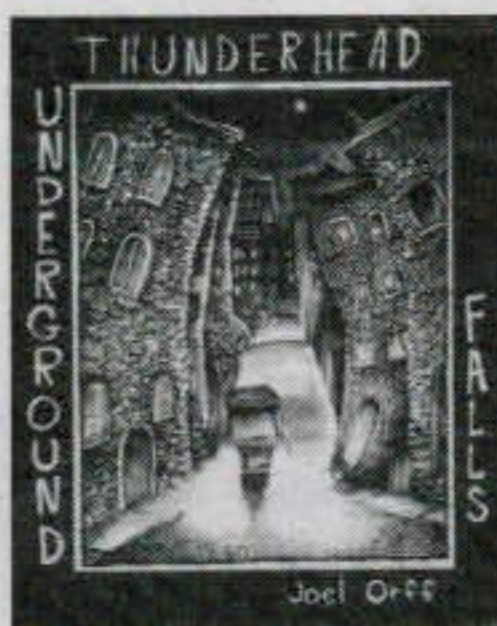
(In all fairness, *Nina* could be interpreted as being feminist—although I'm not sold on that being the actual intent of the author. Nina is a young girl who is desirable to many people who try to control her through her sexuality, but in each encounter Nina ends up being the person with the upper hand—you know, 'cuz she's a crazy person who doesn't give a fuck, and the adults end up getting damaged because she has the power.

I'd be hard-pressed to tell you that's what I thought Dahlia's aim was, though.)

The only shocking things that I found while reading the book were the extreme lack of character development, and the fact that in the author blurb, Dahlia claims that he lives in San Francisco and "doesn't do a damn thing." Puh-leeze.

I *do* think that it's possible to write a book that shares the same aim as *Nina* does—to shock and provoke—and to actually have it be *good*, even in the atmosphere we live in today where stories of teenagers (girls) gone bad are *de rigueur*. So, I would suggest that you go and find one of those books to read, instead of wasting your cash on this yawmfest.

—Thera Webb

**Thunderhead Underground Falls**

Joel Orff

128 pages • \$14.95

Alternative Comics

503 NW 37th Ave.

Gainesville, FL 32609-2204

www.indyworld.com/altcomics

Via Alternative Comics, Joel Orff has released his new graphic novel *Thunderhead Underground Falls*. With intentionally jagged illustrations, Orff carves out a story of a young man driving full-speed into the pressures and consequences of becoming an adult. The story's protagonist, Jack Martin, is reveling in a final adventure with a female companion who is trying to convince him to desert the Army, which is about to send him to the Middle East. In a boxy off-road vehicle, Jack and his friend escape further into the snowy west, temporarily running from his future. A blizzard serenely wraps the two of them in a peace that Jack often compares to the violent world he is about to enter. At times, the only tension more intense than Jack's reserve duty is the palpable yet futile friendship with his female acquaintance. Spliced with visions of his future and thoughts of his past, the storyline illustrates the complicated mind of a man overwhelmed with a huge decision and its costs.

Orff stays true to the DIY style of simple black and white drawings that are a little rough on the edges; very similar to the string of comics that were popular in the zine world of the late-'90s such as *King Cat* (who I was not surprised to see linked on Orff's website). Most of the illustrations are simple and interesting but a few pages seemed rushed and unnecessarily sloppy. If computer-style pixilated-shading doesn't contradict the jagged aesthetic then I don't think mixing in a pen with a finer point should be out of the question; in fact, I think it's the major thing this piece is missing. However, Orff's drawing style is appealing and proves that you don't have to be Frank Miller to put out a visually charming graphic novel.

Thunderhead Underground Falls demonstrates Orff's ability to develop a compelling story. Though it was a little cheesy, I found sympathy with the characters in the narrative and their hopeless romanticism. While I can't relate to all of Jack's choices, his strong emotional decisions and struggles with his own contradictions have a universal appeal. I would never join the US Armed Forces, making it easy for me to hope that Jack would desert, so when his friend pleads with him to not go (reminding him that they are outsiders and misfits who are not a part of what the war is about) I wondered what other reason he needs to stay. Jack is that kid who you desperately need to give a great punk mix tape before someone else starts giving him weed and tickets to Korn's "Family Values" tour.

One point in the story that was difficult for me to wrap my mind around takes place in a late night conversation between Jack and his unnamed friend. Jack says, "You know what I'm afraid of most? I'm afraid that I won't see things the same when I get back...the sound of the train...the smell of spring...the feeling of the early morning..." These all seemed like intelligent well-reasoned concerns, all of which happen to clash with the thought process of everyone I know going into the armed forces in the last few years. This emo-esque anxiety doesn't fit with my coworker who is eagerly leaving for the Marines in a month and can't wait to shoot "everything in the Middle East, including kids," as he puts it. My bias aside, I suppose it's possible for people with a healthy cognitive process to go into the Army.

The entire tale seems to take place over one evening, constantly drifting into footnotes of Jack's past and thoughts of the future. A few pages leave you wondering what exactly becomes of Jack, and the plot leaves a few compelling loose ends. Orff has proven talent as a storyteller. I hope he continues to develop his skills and polish his style. This is a great example of an indie comic with emotionally laden characters (think Nate Powell if he was less punk and drew like the guy who made *Dr. Katz*). Check his website for this and other works.

—Lowell Fletcher