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Comics & Graphic Novels

Back + Forth
Marta Chudolinska
The Porcupine's Quill
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The rise of graphic forms in recent years has brought visual art to the centre of contemporary literary criticism. Stepping into the fray with her wordless novel *Back + Forth: A Novel in 90 Linocuts* Polish-Canadian Marta Chudolinska challenges readers to interpret and understand the meanings conveyed by images alone. Her work is grounded in tradition; predecessors like Giacomo Patri and Helena Bocharakova published political works using similar techniques in the 1930s. Chudolinska, for her part, displays a keen attention to the process of meaning-making.

While Chudolinska's linocut images themselves are compelling and thought-provoking, *Back + Forth* benefits greatly from its foreword; in it, visual artist and printmaker George A. Walker provides a historical and theoretical framework through which readers may enter potentially unfamiliar territory. Walker points to hermeneutical concepts raised by Alberto Manguel and Martin Heidegger (and by extension alludes to the study of semiotics) in his introduction to the novel.

The remarkable thing about a book like this is that it is at once open to wide interpretation (what Walker suggests is that teleportation might also be read as dream- or memory-sequences) *and* is presented in a very concrete art form. In ninety linocuts, prints made by carving the relief of a desired image into a piece of linoleum, a galaxy of complex emotions is revealed. The plot of the novel is nearly static (or perhaps entirely fluid), though the geography of the book very blatantly encounters both Toronto and Vancouver; the changes that occur seem to be mental, within the primary character. The central character's relationship with a now-ex boyfriend is examined, and her travels between both cities are represented using strong visual cues. Toronto is portrayed in black, while Vancouver is printed in a mellow brown tone; the transitions between the two mental states/geographic locales are represented by close-up images of eyes opening.

Back + Forth has a very real-feeling quality to it, despite its nebulous meanings and

seeming intentional lack of conclusions; perhaps this is due to its location in recognizable places or the ease of identifying with some of its most clear-cut plot points such as riding a bus, having sex, or sitting and thinking in a coffee shop. While “reading” what amounts to a high-art picture book for adults can be dislocating, it is also very rewarding; *Back + Forth* sets out to probe readers’ understandings of narrative and character, and does it well. Recommended.