

## Black Jack, Volume 1

**Osamu Tezuka**

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Black Jack, one of the best known pop culture characters in Japan, is also, oddly, the Osamu Tezuka creation perhaps most accessible to both Western and non-manga readers generally. And that's not the only odd thing about the eponymous anti-hero of these adventures. The world's foremost unlicensed surgeon, Black Jack is equal parts Mad Scientist, Gregory House, Phantom of the Opera, and Batman.

Indeed, the open-ended nature of his protagonist—a brilliant free agent who operates across geographical and social borders—allows Tezuka to create a rich gallery of grotesqueries. Some of these dozen tales are humorous, some touching, some simply horrifying. So if the offbeat is your thing when it comes to literature, graphic or otherwise, look no further. You'll meet, among many others, an eyebank recipient subject to disturbing visions, a malevolent "face sore," and a painter named "Go Gan" who desperately needs a brain transplant.

Those familiar with Tezuka will find that *Black Jack* includes many of his perennial themes: heart-tugging parent—child relationships, a macabre treatment of social justice issues, and even a bodily stitched-together "innocent" à la *Astro Boy* and *Dororo*. Yet the reason this book could also serve as a perfect introduction to manga itself is that each twenty- to twenty-five-page story is self-contained and satisfying in its own right. While their order, selected by Tezuka for the definitive Japanese edition, does provide a rough narrative continuity, readers aren't committing themselves to an epic, multi-volume story. One result of the brisk pace, though, is that Tezuka is restrained from indulging in his trademark artistic flourishes. That means you won't find quite as many expansively detailed establishing shots or innovative page layouts as in his other works, but the economy of the storytelling is worth the trade-off: these stories can be devoured like popcorn.

Ostensibly a medical drama, *Black Jack* actually permits Tezuka to explore a variety of genres—science fiction, mystery/suspense, social drama, romance, and horror. Throughout, Black Jack himself remains largely aloof. In this respect, the episodes recall British secret agent TV series of the '60s, in which half the fun was seeing a new crop of colorful characters interact with our coolly detached loner. Like Gregory House, Black Jack's superior intellect and lack of a personal life put him very much in the Sherlock Holmes mold—a vaguely misanthropic, vaguely de-ranged genius working on society's fringes. Join him or miss out on the fun.

PETER GUTIÉRREZ (December 15, 2008)

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