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Comics & Graphic Novels

Black Leopard
Wing Shing Ma
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The feel of a Kung Fu movie, with its combatants sailing through the air and inflicting terrible damage with the touch of a hand, is captured beautifully in this convoluted adventure story about the rivalry between Black Leopard and Edge Sanbu. Edge, the son of a power-hungry magnate, craves a fair fight with Black Leopard, who is a martial arts champion and leader of a covert ops team (also called Black Leopard).

Superbly drawn and colored with a bold yet delicate touch, the artwork of this book advances the action far better than the text. The author/illustrator, who lives in Hong Kong, has also produced the “Storm Riders” series of Chinese martial arts comics, which have been popular in Asia for a decade.

Here, a one-page introduction sets the scene for the story, but also relates early Black Leopard team history that seems irrelevant, involving espionage, secret missions, corruption, and a conspiracy to seize world power, with principals in both China and Japan. The complex relationships between characters are sometimes confusing, and read more like a soap opera than a Kung Fu tale. When the book opens, Black Leopard is seeking to retrieve his sword from its two guardians, who are feng shui experts. They challenge him to prove his sincerity, setting him to meditate in the center of a circle that will focus his chi and make him even more powerful.

As Leopard sits in stillness, he is “protected” by Fong Jing, who has set himself to guard his companion. Yet Fong Jing is more in need of protection than the amazingly powerful Leopard, who is able to thwart the attack of a powerful enemy simply by slapping the ground with both hands; the shock wave protects him from harm. What is fascinating is the churning action surrounding the still Leopard, and the way the artist draws speed, motion, and power. The book is a delight to the eye.

Leopard retrieves his sword successfully and goes on to face Edge Sanbu, who is determined to fight him fairly in the spirit of the warrior. Rescues, subterfuge, escapes, and

hostages keep the action going as earthquakes, thunderstorms, and waves keep the atmosphere electric. Treachery is met by honor, and prodigals return home. The first duel is succeeded by a second, in the spirit of fairness. Yet the story is far from over at the end of the second duel; resolutions lead to yet more intrigue.

While the writing lags behind the exceptional artwork, the characters are appealing and there's promise in the storyline. Melodrama aside, readers will want to learn what happens next to Leopard and Edge.

Marlene Satter