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Comics & Graphic Novels

Buddha Volume One: Kapilavastu
Osamu Tezuka (illustrator)
Vertical
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While Westerners watched Disney cartoons, the author watched too-and created his own. The "godfather" of Japanese manga and anime (comics and animation), originally trained as a medical doctor, went on to shape the Japanese animation industry as few others could.

Readers of manga already know Tezuka. If they haven't yet discovered his rendering of the story of Buddha, originally published in Japan in 1987, now is the time to explore this five-volume edition. The original artwork "has been produced as a mirror-image," says a note on the copyright page, "in order to conform with the English language." Japanese comics, of course, are read back to front.

Tezuka has created two characters, the young boys Tatta, a pariah, and Chapra, a slave, who introduce the reader to the caste system and the harshness of life for those at its bottom. Chapra, delivering some fabric, is set upon by Tatta, who steals the goods. Chapra returns empty-handed to his master, and is whipped and told that if he fails to recover the fabric within three days, his mother will be sold.

Chapra fights Tatta and his gang; outnumbered, he loses. But when he tells Tatta about his mother, the pariah decides to free her, and he exchanges consciousness with a tiger. The tiger attacks the slave procession and drags Chapra's mother to freedom. Tatta becomes himself again, and tells Chapra that he is able to get inside animals' minds because, as a pariah, he has been regarded as less than human: "I bet you have to hit rock bottom and start wondering if you aren't just a beast after all."

The charm of the cleanly drawn pictures is just one of the wonders of this book. The skill evident in every drawing, the emotions visible in every character-from animal to human-and the smooth progression of the story mark the hand of a master. Although Tezuka was heavily influenced by Disney, his work remained fresh and original, and his love for and respect of nature and animals is evident throughout.

The three characters stay together, later assisted by a Brahmin monk, and they experience miraculous happenings and acts of selflessness, accompanied by death, destruction, and war. They find themselves challenged at every turn. The monk learns a lot from the two boys, as the child Siddhartha is born nearby.

It is a grand beginning to a grand story; readers will be eager to see what comes next.

Marlene Satter