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Comics & Graphic Novels

Cities of the Fantastic: The Invisible Frontier Volume I
Benoit Peeters
Franois Schuiten
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The first thing that readers will note about this highly unusual tale of a cartographer in a strange and futile-seeming society on an apparent track toward doom of some kind, is the magnificence of the artwork. This is appropriate, since the graphic novel is designed to tell its story not only with words, but with images that fill the mind and if not delight, at least arrest the eye.

Roland de Cremer is a young cartographer of distinguished family who reports for work to a strange edifice, a cross between a dome and a massive high-rise apartment building. He settles into his new quarters at the Center for Cartography, acquires a dog that had belonged to the previous occupant, and begins work. Outside, the Center is surrounded by a desert wasteland and dump; within the Center, apartments and offices fill the structural shell and offer views across an inner landscape at the heart of the great dome that is being turned into a giant relief map reproduction.

Roland is soon accepted and even promoted, although he finds things about the hierarchy of the Center that trouble him. He meets a mysterious woman with maplike markings on her body, and worries about a political scheme to envelop outlying cities within the territory of Greater Sodrovno-Voldachia. “Cartography,” says the leader on a visit to the Center, “is a branch of military art.”

Schuiten is an architect, and Peeters is a scholar and historian on comics. Their combined expertise in creating this story of a troubling world in which accuracy is gradually being sacrificed for a “greater” cause conjured up by politicians is visually stunning for its meticulous detail and Old-World feel. While the coloring is subdued, echoing the seemingly colorless existence of the inhabitants, it is delicately rendered and much is conveyed by its low-key appearance.

While the drawings evoke a distant age-either of a past with curiously modern clothing

or of a far-off future with anachronistic twentieth-century details-the story itself is a bit slow to develop, although both drawings and text set an atmosphere of futility and dread. Denouement is promised for Volume II.

Marlene Satter