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Dame Darcy's Meat Cake Compilation

Dame Darcy
Fantagraphics Books (June 2003)
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Take a Victorian mansion, strange women clad in striped stockings and flowing garments, a mermaid, a wolf walking upright and dressed like a man, and a banjo-playing doll. Throw in knives, gore, dismemberment, and death. Mix well. Enclose in a pink binding, tip the pages in silver, and put a richly-colored piece of artwork on the front cover. The result is a somewhat dangerous confection—an eerie concoction of tales that seem more like dreams, or nightmares, than actual stories.

Underground comics challenge the status quo of their readers' minds, and there are plenty of challenges within these pages. The author is rather like Edward Gorey run mad. The strange inhabitants of the pages of this volume include Friend the Girl, the most "normal" of the characters (at least on the surface); Richard Dirt, who, contrary to her name, is female; a mermaid named Effluvia, who uses a car and a wheelchair to get to a restaurant on land; a family who goes to a "cake walk" to win a charge from a device reminiscent of an electric chair; and Strega Pez, the girl who dispenses Pez tablets through her cut throat in lieu of speaking. A recurring theme is the appearance of characters with two heads, beginning with Hindrance and Perfidia, a two-headed girl; there is even a story about an egg with two yolks.

The author studied film and animation at the San Francisco Art Institute. Her art has been exhibited in galleries around the country; her illustrations and comics have appeared in publications like *The Village Voice*, *L.A. Weekly*, and *D.C. Comics*. She also writes interview articles for the New York-based *Index Magazine*, and her theatrical work, *Meat Cake the Play* has been produced on the East Coast.

Her tales in this collection of the first seven issues of the Meat Cake comic books feature strange and disturbing plots. Most are wickedly satiric, but the poignancy of the story "Stained Glass" mixes grotesquerie with grief in the story of a man who built his bride a home of stained glass. When he goes away on business, she abandons their newborn son to starve in his cradle; on his return, the man goes mad, makes a new body for the dead baby out of stained glass, and then cuts the throat of his wife.

The artwork is detail-rich, maintaining a Victorian flavor, and there are lots of macabre and even gruesome drawings to relate the various cautionary tales. There's also a strong erotic element throughout, with the most graphic depiction occurring in the front endpapers. Even the title, says Darcy, is "what I thought to be the most decadent of all food, a combination of Meat and Cake."

Decadence is the byword here: *Meat Cake* is not for the faint of heart or the easily offended.

MARLENE SATTER (January / February 2004)

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