

★ **Ex Libris**

Matt Madden

Uncivilized Books (Oct 19, 2021)

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Matt Madden uses multiple methods of visual storytelling in the surreal, inventive graphic novel *Ex Libris*.

A troubled person enters a room that holds a bookshelf stocked with comics and graphic novels. Wondering about the provenance of the books, they undertake a mission to “become a true reader” of comics. They have no memory of coming to the room, a situation echoed in a story they read about a person marooned at a remote desert outpost.

As the book proceeds, the person sees other echoes in different kinds of graphic stories, including superhero, horror, and romance titles. Most of the stories seem to involve people who are “trapped or stuck somewhere,” and their pages serve as clever tributes to their respective genres, with appropriate fonts, colors, and art styles. Humor comes through as they emphasize hallmarks, like the angsty problems of money, love, and adulthood in a “serious” graphic novel.

The unnamed person suffers the effects of a breakup with M., a conceit that keeps them mysterious while still providing an intimate point of view. A panel reads: “That’s exactly what M. said —no, what I said... Well, one of us said it.” Inspired by a story about a witch who escapes prison by climbing into her own drawing, they take control of the larger story and leave the room.

This elegant showcase of graphic storytelling displays deep knowledge of the language of comics. The book’s metafictional forays always serve the unnamed reader’s tale, too; the subtle build of the mood and suspense around them results in a dazzling graphic novel.

PETER DABBENE (September / October 2021)

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