ForeWord Reviews

COMICS & GRAPHIC NOVELS

New School
Dash Shaw
Fantagraphics
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Teenage angst and sibling rivalry are excellent additions to this graphic novel's hero journey.

New School is the latest graphic novel from Dash Shaw, the creator of *BodyWorld* and *Bottomless Belly Button*. Like its predecessors, *New School* is unlike everything else out there. In other words, it's exactly what you'd expect from this acclaimed cartoonist.

Initially, *New School* seems a straightforward coming-of-age tale featuring Danny and Luke Andrews, two teenage brothers growing up in New Jersey circa 1990. Danny adores his older sibling. This adulation prompts Danny to trace his brother's drawings in an effort to emulate Luke's native talent. Then, in a moment of weakness, Danny claims that he actually drew one of his tracings, a falsehood that results in a violent confrontation with Luke, who soon leaves for the island known as X.

Later, Danny is sent to X by his worried parents to locate Luke, who has been incommunicado since his departure. Upon his arrival, Danny is met by his brother and Esther, Luke's girlfriend. Luke seems greatly changed by his time away spent teaching English to the Xians as they prepare to open Clockworld, an immense theme park featuring recreations of mankind's important historical moments. At first, Danny is confused by his new home and the changes in his brother. Then, intrigued by what this strange world offers, he tries to adapt to it, only to fail miserably. Danny's resulting antisocial behavior proves infectious, and soon both brothers are taking advantage of the Xians' trusting natures and vandalizing their surroundings, activities that lead to their being sent home, disgraced.

However, as is the case with the best modern comics produced by Shaw and his compatriots, there's more going on than is immediately apparent. Underlying all of the teenage angst, sibling rivalry, and hormonal confusion, one discovers the same structures that inform the hero's journey so eloquently detailed in the work of Joseph Campbell. The hero here is Danny. Possessed of limited precognition, he never uses it to any real effect until exiled from X. He then

focuses upon his future, receiving a vision of what he's capable of once he embraces his own special abilities and responsibilities.

It's a startling yet aptly mundane vision of one man's future, made all the more believable by Shaw's expressive, cartoony drawings and generally solid scripting. While *New School* is not without its faults—some dialogue feels belabored, for instance—ultimately, it's an entertaining and thoughtful graphic novel.

Bill Baker