ForeWord Reviews

COMICS & GRAPHIC NOVELS

Rasl, Volume 2: The Fire of St. George
Jeff Smith
Cartoon Books
978-1-888963-22-9
(May 13, 2010)

Jeff Smith is perhaps the most accomplished cartoonist and storyteller of his generation, no small praise for an artist whose contemporaries include the likes of Alison Bechdel (*Fun Home*) and Chris Ware (*Acme Library*). Smith first gained widespread recognition and acclaim for *Bone* , a massive all-ages fantasy that encompasses multiple genres, from Disney-esque funny animals to *Pogo*-influenced sociopolitical comedy, from heart-rending unrequited love to a truly epic battle between the forces of good and evil. It was a feat which took him over a decade to complete. But through all those years and across those hundreds of pages, the Ohio native proved himself a master craftsman, fully capable of creating a graphic novel whose narrative and visual elements form a seamless whole.

After a short detour into mainstream super-heroics, Smith's returned to self-publishing with *Rasl*, another genre-defying chimera cobbled together from bits of string theory, odd historical moments, and a pulp-fueled sensibility that is utterly engaging and original. However, while it's true that he's lost none of his creative chops, this new series is a decided departure from Smith's past work in at least one important way—this is a story intended for a mature audience.

Rasl focuses on a scientist-turned-fugitive art thief as he flees between realities. He's a character defined as much by his faults as by his strengths. And the fact that his current circumstances are largely due to a volatile combination of those opposing traits—his giving in to his basest nature on the one hand, and an unflagging adherence to a noble ideal on the other—only underscores the truth that, no matter where he runs, his problems will remain his constant companions.

But while the man at the heart of this story is full of faults, Smith's storytelling is not. His lush line work, use of negative space and spotting of blacks are perfectly executed. Characterizations are solid and believable, yet capable of surprising even the most seasoned of readers. A palpable grittiness infuses the visuals and dialogue, an earthiness reflective of the dark themes and atmosphere of this noir-infused sci-fi potboiler.

This recently-released second volume follows volume one, *The Drift*. Each volume offers universe-spanning adventure even as it explores those tender and terrible territories within the human heart.

Bill Baker