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Comics & Graphic Novels

Raven Girl
Audrey Niffenegger
Abrams ComicArts
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Strange, compelling, and disturbing, this twenty-first century fable raises questions about genetic tinkering and self-identity.

Audrey Niffenegger hit the bestseller lists with her novel *The Time Traveler's Wife*, but her roots lie in the realm of graphic artistry. The latest fruit of her visual storytelling efforts is the modern fairy tale, *Raven Girl*.

Raven Girl begins with a lonely postman taking in a young raven who's fallen from her nest. Romance develops between the two, and they eventually have a daughter: Raven Girl, who appears human but can't speak, and feels like a bird trapped in a girl's body. Raven Girl later meets a doctor who, at her pleading request, replaces her arms with wings, giving her a more birdlike appearance, and, possibly, the potential to fly.

Niffenegger previously published the graphic novels *The Three Incestuous Sisters*, *The Adventuress*, and *The Night Bookmobile*.

The story itself was conceived in response to a request by the choreographer of the Royal Ballet for a new fairy tale that would serve as the starting point for a dance production. *Raven Girl* is strange, compelling, and disturbing; it is, perhaps, meant to disturb, with its questions raised, implicitly or explicitly, about chimeras, genetic tinkering, and self-identity. There are obvious parallels with transgender individuals who feel like they were "meant to be" something else. A boy who protests Raven Girl's surgical alterations as immoral is eventually swept away by a group of ravens, never to be seen again.

Less intentionally controversial is the nature of the romance between the raven (Raven Girl's mother) and the postman. The postman takes the bird, a fledgling, to his home and takes care of her but does not inform her parents. It's a jarring transition from a rescuer's gentle care for a baby bird, to the idea that he will end his romantic loneliness with his charge.

This all might seem a bit too dark, if not for Niffenegger's light touch and the humor she interjects throughout the book. The postman has nightmares involving email, and a boy intrigued by Raven Girl has dreams that are equally traumatic and humorous: "He went to the movies with an enormous black bird. She ate popcorn. He put his arm around her shoulders, then he was not sure if birds have shoulders. The movie was Hitchcock's *The Birds*."

Provocative and beautiful, Audrey Niffenegger's *Raven Girl* is, indeed, a twenty-first century fable—one that deserves a place on the bookshelves of readers and art lovers alike.

Peter Dabbene