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Comics & Graphic Novels

Special Exits: A Bittersweet Memoir
Joyce Farmer
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As its subtitle suggests, *Special Exits* is an autobiographical comic. What's not readily apparent is that the book's main focus isn't upon the author's life. Instead, *Special Exits* presents a warts-and-all depiction of the inexorable decline and eventual deaths of Lars and Rachel, the creator's aged father and stepmother, as a series of vignettes.

Yes, it's a heartbreaking—even harrowing—tale, one made all the more moving and immediate by the creator's nuanced gift for capturing the es-sence of her parents on the page. But it's also a tale told with consummate skill, filled with mordant humor and real compassion, an almost embarrassing amount of candor, and a deep abiding love and respect for its subjects.

Farmer, who first came to prominence as a feminist cartoonist in the 1970s' underground comix scene, spent over a decade crafting *Special Exits*, and her devotion to her craft is apparent from the first panel to last. Her loosely-penciled, tightly-inked line work is perfectly suited to the task at hand, whether delineating human figures or inanimate objects.

As for her storytelling, there's nary a misstep. Despite its episodic structure, the perfectly-paced narrative flows effortlessly. And Farmer's choices of which moments and perspectives to draw are dead on, further ensuring an involving, even immersive reading experience.

But perhaps the most startling aspect of Farmer's work is her uncanny ability to capture the very life of her interesting, quirky, sometimes exasperating but always lovable parents with but pen, ink, and paper. The reader doesn't just learn about their lives as a function of the plot, although the particulars of their individual pasts and long life together are explored in flashbacks organically incorporated into the narrative flow. Instead, the reader comes to know and cherish these flawed but good people naturally, over the course of the book—which makes bearing witness to their demise all the more painful.

However, this is no dour elegy. Quite the opposite, in fact, as the strange new

possibilities glimpsed by the gathered survivors on the closing page so fittingly demonstrates. Ultimately, it's these simple and true moments of mundane magic which marks *Special Exits* as more than just one of the best books released this year. It is, without a doubt, also one of the most significant contributions to the comics medium this side of the millennium, a modern masterpiece which celebrates the human condition.

Bill Baker