

The Con Artist

Fred Van Lente

Tom Fowler, Illustrator

Quirk Books (Jul 10, 2018)

Softcover \$14.99 (288pp)

978-1-68369-034-4

The Con Artist is a lively romp loaded with geek humor. A longtime comic book writer, author Fred Van Lente has a deep familiarity with the annual San Diego Comic-Con, which has become the central event of the comic book industry. Along with all of the associated television, movie, toy, and video game publicity and attention, it makes for a unique spectacle—and a great setting for a quirky and humorous mystery.

Mike Mason, a comic book artist (and the subject of the book's title) arrives in San Diego to live a nomadic existence, going from one convention to the next. When his rival turns up dead, all eyes turn to Mike, and he embarks on a desperate mission to clear his name and solve the crime.

There are enough geek culture jokes and references to keep any fan happy—one two-page sequence name-drops *Doctor Who*, *Game of Thrones*, *The Handmaid's Tale*, Black Widow, Spider-Man, and the 1979 *Plastic Man* cartoon, among others. But Van Lente is able to poke fun at real-life situations, too. In one laugh-out-loud sequence, Mason encounters a religious proselytizer, declares himself a “real big fan” of the Bible, and expounds on it, in geek culture terms:

The scuttlebutt for a long time was that it couldn't really expand past a small niche audience. But then, you see, they did a really smart thing: a soft reboot between Books One and Two that retconned out of existence a lot of the stranger and more confusing aspects of the continuity.

Mike's sketches, provided by artist Tom Fowler, add a visual element to the proceedings, and the murder mystery itself is competent, involving valuable original art and the requisite cast of possible suspects. But first and foremost, *The Con Artist* serves as both a love letter and an expert skewering of the excesses and eccentricities of comic book culture.

PETER DABBENE (July/August 2018)

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