

## The Gullfather: Birdsy Seagull: Vol 1. A Seahawk Situation

**Jeffrey Sikaitis**

**Jake Wheeler**

Birdbrain Studio

(92pp)

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*An underground organization of seagulls confronts environmental degradation in The Gullfather, a funny avian graphic novel adventure.*

Mafiosi seagulls attempt to take back their shoreline in Emmy-winning Jeffrey Sikaitis and Jake Wheeler's series-opening graphic novel *The Gullfather*.

Birdsy Seagull leads the gulls of Shoretown. Together, they seek to counter the human beings who have contributed to pollution and who set up a wooden seahawk to frighten gulls away—among other transgressions.

Meanwhile, a terrified gull, Sweet Beak, is in hiding from Birdsy and his crew. Sweet Beak describes Birdsy as “the top crime bird on land, in the air or under the sea”; throughout the book, it's shown that whatever respect Birdsy has gained has been accompanied by an undercurrent of violence, fear, and intimidation. He flashes cash of unknown origins around town and is variously generous to the locals and prone to siccing his muscle on bullies.

The book's Mafia-history influences and reference points are likely to be at odds with the knowledge of its middle-grade target audience, who stand to miss out on the book's puns and wordplay (as with Birdsy's name). Further, these references set expectations of ruthlessness that are only sometimes delivered upon; there's an uneasy bridge between Birdsy's reputation and his group's position as the story's heroes. Despite an effort to reframe Birdsy as a leader fighting against environmental destruction who seeks to “restore Shoretown to its past glory,” the gulls are never wholly sympathetic. And the novel plays on stereotypes of Italians to off-putting effect.

Still, the book's design is attractive, and its characters are introduced on full-page spreads that are made to look like Polaroid photographs taped on a wall. The artwork is exceptional and funny, from the portrayals of secondary characters to slapstick encounters (as with the gulls' theft of a bag of chips, which leads to a narrow escape; they drop a crab down a man's pants in the process). And moments of humor stand out, as when a seagull is ordered to “keep a low profile” and takes the command as literal, stretching flat on the boardwalk planks, and when Birdsy threatens Quack Quack, a subordinate, by asking if he wants to swim or sleep with the fishes, and Quack Quack, a lover of eating fish, imagines both scenarios as rewards, not punishments. The book's climactic confrontation is a highlight. But when Birdsy and Quack Quack try on a series of disguises and receive comments on each, some of the feedback is mystifying, as with “Trying to be the back-up singer in a U2 cover band?”

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PETER DABBENE (March 8, 2023)

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