

★ **This Wasn't the Plan**

Nick Mullins

Nijomu (Nov 2, 2018)

Softcover \$14.95 (120pp)

978-0-692-92522-5

Nick Mullins strikes a resonant emotional chord with the exquisite, melancholic storytelling of his graphic novel *This Wasn't the Plan*.

The book collects three stories—"Phantom," "Defrost," and "Sink"—that channel the inner voices of their disillusioned, disappointed, and dysfunctional characters. They include a boy who spies on his parents' party and gets a distasteful glimpse of his own impending adulthood; a young woman starting a new life as an artist, who is quickly dealt a harsh dose of reality; and a frustrated writer whose life is disintegrating around him.

These stories feel real, in part because of telling details like the young protagonist of "Phantom" playing with his Star Wars action figures, or the commonplace problems of work and love that befall the others. Mullins proves himself a master of delivering important information without words, a technique that often falls short as practiced by other author/artists, and he's equally proficient with evocative dialogue and delivery. His pattern of putting spoken words in standard word balloons while using plain, winding lines for their "tails" allows for greater flexibility in his layouts and gives a visual sense of the passage of time. A party scene is also improved by careful crafting, as Mullins uses word balloons cut off by panel borders to indicate partially heard conversations or peripheral noise.

This Wasn't the Plan isn't a bright and cheery book, but it's a contemplative masterpiece featuring memorable characters and affecting, artistically told stories that deserve to be read by a wide audience.

PETER DABBENE (November/December 2018)

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