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Comics & Graphic Novels

Troop 142: A Graphic Novel
Mike Dawson
Secret Acres
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At first glance, Mike Dawson's new graphic novel, *Troop 142*, is puerile, crass, plot-less, and borderline gratuitous with its extensive "poopy" talk. But anyone who has ever spent seven days at camp with a bunch of teenage boys would add to this litany: photographic, realistic, and brutally, beautifully true.

Troop 142 begins on Sunday and follows the adventures of the eponymous group of New Jersey scouts and the dads chaperoning them over the course of a week at Pinewood Forest Camp in the summer of 1995. Merit badges are earned by some and not by others; rules are broken and fights broken up; drugs taken and stolen; classic songs about gopher guts are sung and ghost stories shared.

Applying the same level of merciless scrutiny used by Anton Chekhov, Dawson rips away the naive Norman Rockwell facade of one of the few rites of passage left to young American males, and replaces it with something complex and uncomfortable. By the end of the week, the story finishes by exemplifying a closing remark from the end of Chekhov's short story *The Two Volodyas*: "And after that life went on as before, uninteresting, miserable, and sometimes even agonizing."

Dawson, 2010 recipient of the Ignatz Award for Outstanding Online Comic, proves himself to be a masterful storyteller by relating the scouts' petty conflicts in a way that recreates for the reader the artificial sense of importance lent by youth and inexperience. He pairs this alongside one father's nagging discomfort with the hypocrisy between the institutional morality preached by the scouts and the behaviors he witnesses. The effect is unsettling.

Art-wise, Dawson's drawings are reminiscent of American cartoonist Alison Bechdel, creator of the graphic memoir *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic*, and Belgian cartoonist Georges Rémi (aka Hergé), creator of *Les Aventures de Tintin.* Rémi's influence is seen most clearly in the shading of each character's face under the eyes. And the troop leader's mustache is so

evocative of Captain Archibald Haddock, Tintin's best friend, that it would be easy to think him an homage were their personalities not so diametrically opposed.

The similarity to Bechdel pertains to both her and Dawson's careful attention to posture and body language as storytelling tools. Dawson, however, operates with a greater freedom in terms of panels and pages, giving the environment and chronology a stronger influence on the characters and reader.

Like Ben Snakepit's 2004 autobigraphical *Snakepit* and other postmodern graphic novels, *Troop 142* subverts plot and narrative threads to create a visceral read. It is a challenging work geared to indie-comics fans. And, much like the Boy Scouts of America, as portrayed by Dawson and experienced by his characters, this graphic novel will sharply divide its readers in terms of personal taste but not quality.

Joseph Thompson