

# OTAKI JUSA

ANIME

COSPLAY



## KINO'S JOURNEY A BOY AND HIS BIKE!

## HOST IN THE SHELL ANIME GOES HOLLYWOOD!

## NURSE WITCH KOMUGI R DO YOU BELIEVE IN MAGIC?

# BUNGO STRAY DOGS

THE SUPERNATURAL INVESTIGATORS ARE HERE!

## SHOWA GENROKU RAKUGO SHINJU THE ART OF STORYTELLING!

**ANIME** ATTACK ON TITAN: JUNIOR HIGH,  
INARI KON KON, MY HERO ACADEMIA, OCEAN WAVES,  
GIRLS UND PANZER, AJIN: DEMI-HUMAN

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# OTAKUUSA

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### HOST IN THE SHELL

Have you been keeping up with the news surrounding Hollywood's live-action *Ghost in the Shell* adaptation? Follow along for all you could possibly need to know!



## NEW WEB-EXCLUSIVE SERIES

### Paul Chapman's "Vault of Error"

Not all anime purchases are the best decisions. Find out what Paul Thomas Chapman finds on a regular basis in his "Vault of Error," only at [www.otakuusamagazine.com](http://www.otakuusamagazine.com)!



### ATTACK ON TITAN: JUNIOR HIGH

*Attack on Titan: Junior High* offered up its own comedic spin on the main series, so find out if *Assassination Classroom* managed to do the same with its spinoff.

### YAKUZA 0

One of the reviews we were really excited about wouldn't fit into this issue, so check out our take on the 80s Japan explosion that is *Yakuza 0*.



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# Digital Content In This Issue

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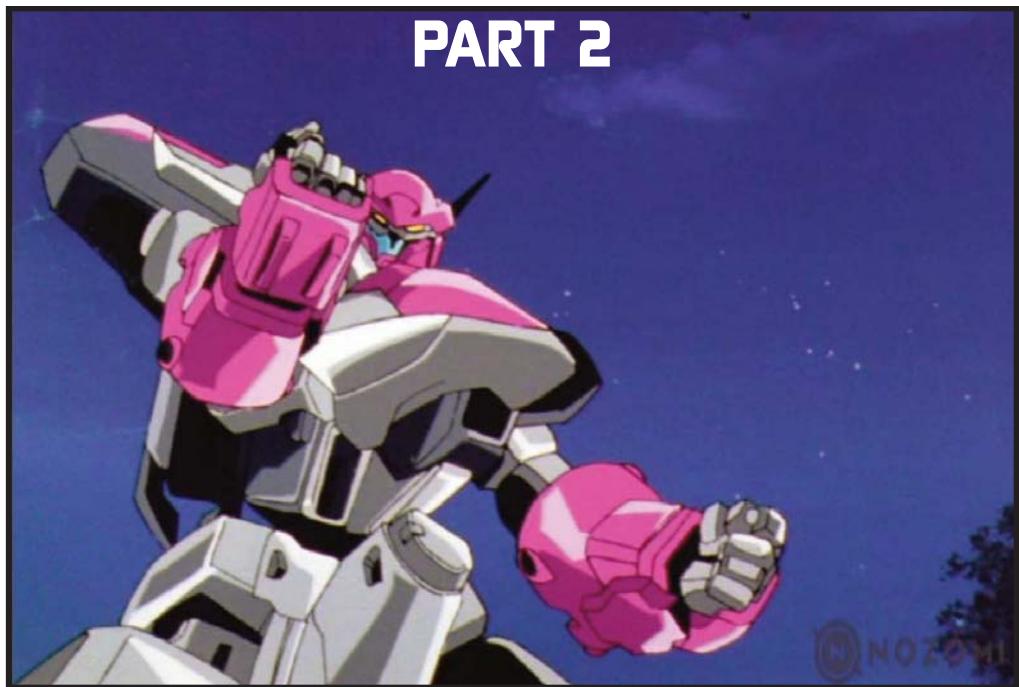
### Martian Successor Nadesico

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from Nazomi Entertainment



# June 2017

## TRAILERS



### Girls und Panzer der Film SENDAI FILMWORKS

While the Oorai tank crew may have won the high school tournament, they're now facing a larger and more experienced university team, and if they fail, their armored vehicles will be forfeit! Winning a tank battle is all about tactics and teamwork, and the Ooarai students have more friends and allies than anyone suspects. Get ready for another high-caliber round of the only sport where "having a blast" doesn't necessarily mean you're having a great time, as the Ooarai team puts everything on the line!

### Attack on Titan: Junior High FUNIMATION

Attack on Titan is reimagined in this junior high microseries! Eren and his friends are first-year students at a unique school for both humans and Titans alike. While most humans are happy to avoid the massive monstrosities, Eren will stop at nothing to exact revenge on the hungry Titan who ate something more precious than human life - his mom's homemade chee-burg bento! Join the secret Scout Regiment as they plan to stop the Titans while Eren masters the omni-directional mobility gear to clean the massive wall surrounding the campus.



# OTAKU USA

オタク

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## editorial

## Doing Time in Mondo Tokyo

HEY! THIS IS PATRICK and hey! Welcome to the new issue of *Otaku USA* magazine! For 10+ years and counting, we've been bringing you a bimonthly mega dose of anime and manga, with massive side dishes of other fun stuff like cosplay, games, live-action movies, and lots more. If you are new to our pages, thanks for picking us up! And if you're a regular, we warmly welcome you back!

So what have we in store for you this issue? Well ... *Bungo Stray Dogs* is our cover feature this time, and ace writer Paul Thomas Chapman provides his pulse-pounding text about this show, inspired by Japanese literary legends. Up next, contributors Evan Minto and Daryl Surat get new neural implants and other cyberpunk accoutrements to get under the skin of the *Ghost in the Shell* phenomenon (perhaps you've heard of the new live-action remake?). Things get magical and pink (with a touch of parody) as Brittany Vincent steps up to cover *Nurse Witch Komugi R.* Up next, our guy Ink tells a tale about the highly acclaimed anime *Showa Genroku Rakugo Shinju*. And finally, Ink does double duty with a look back at the freewheelin' series known as *Kino's Journey*.

In between, you'll find our usual selection of reviews, departments, and manga samples. Also, keep your eyes open for a surprise attack from The Green Slime!

So what else is going on? Well, right now as I sit writing this, it is early February. We are still a few weeks into the winter 2017 anime season with shows like *eLDLIVE*, *Gabriel DropOut*, *Interviews with Monster Girls*, *Piaicevole ~My Italian Cooking~*, *Seiren*, and *Spiritpact* all demanding viewer attention. On the news front, 2017 will see new seasons for *Attack on Titan*, *My Hero Academia*, and *Sailor Moon Crystal* set to debut while recent big smash hit anime movies like *Your Name* and *In this Corner of the World* are officially getting releases in the USA (from FUNimation and Shout! Factory, respectively). So it's a pretty amazing time to be an anime fan, and thus ... an *Otaku USA* reader!

As our magazine is poised on completing 10 years of being published, I suppose it only makes sense that I am starting to feel a bit of warm and fuzzy nostalgia for days now past. Around 10 years ago, I began traveling to Tokyo on a regular basis, which overlapped with my work as editor of *Otaku USA* magazine. During that time, I have met a few interesting folks (musicians, maids, voice actors, animators, Godzilla freaks, DJs, digital artists, idol singers, etc.) and have been in a fair share of crazy situations. Out of fear of someday losing all my marbles and forgetting all the fun times, I decided it was time to finally start cataloging them all in one place. The result is *MONDO TOKYO: Snapshots from Inside Japanese Subculture*, an ongoing eBook I am publishing FOR FREE over on Wattpad.com. Just go over there and search on title and take a look at my text and pics! If you're already on Wattpad writing and sharing stuff, follow me and I'll follow you back! It's one more way for us to stay in touch in between issues, and hopefully (if you are super curious about the weird stuff just under the surface of anime and manga) you'll enjoy the ride.

But for now, enjoy the new issue of *Otaku USA* magazine!



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Entertainment



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© 2016 BANDAI NAMCO Entertainment Inc. Localization © 2016 GAIJINWORKS. "PlayStation" the "PS" Family logo, "PS4", and "PS VITA" are registered trademarks of Sony Interactive Entertainment Inc. Still reading this stuff, huh?

# LETTERS/TEGAMI

Dear *Otaku USA*,

First off, you guys are 100% AWESOME. I love your magazine with all of your cool reviews on anime, manga, and video games! Your magazine's reviews and features have all opened me up to new anime that I've never even heard of, including two of my favorite recent titles: *BBK/BRNK* and *Twin Star Exorcists*. Now, I am happy to make them a part of my collection of favorites along with *Fairy Tail*, *Princess Mononoke*, *BLEACH*, *Pokémon*, & *Kamisama Kiss*, just to name a few. So, thank you all for the hard work in exploring all things Japan and bringing these cool reviews and features to us! I love your magazine (oops, didn't I mention that already?) so much that I make you this pledge: I will remain subscribed to your magazine for as long as you guys are in print ... which I hope is forever! Before I end, are you guys going to do a special feature (or even a cover story) on *Princess Mononoke*? It was my "gateway anime" and since it has been 20 years since the movie premiered in Japan, wouldn't it be great to revisit this title? Please keep bringing us more anime and cool things from Japan!

Your loyal friend and follower,  
James—The "Dark Kiba"



Hi James! Thanks so much for your rousing and wildly inspiring letter! We're happy we've kept your interest in new anime titles growing and growing and growing! We've never had anyone take the extra dramatic step of actually making a pledge to keep subscribing to us before, but ... we like it a lot! So let's flip it a bit: you keep subscribing, and we promise to keep printing! And while we haven't done a cover story on *Princess Mononoke* before (we hadn't even started publishing when it originally came out!) we are more than happy to publish a pic from your beloved gateway anime on this very page. Enjoy!

Hello, *Otaku USA*! I'm a big fan of your magazine and I use your reviews to find new anime and manga series to watch and read. (I never thought I'd find an anime magazine in a grocery store. LOL!). Anyway, I have a question about the manga you put in the magazine: I've noticed that sometimes a series gets a review soon before or after you have the preview. However, sometimes they don't get your "recommended" status. Why

there! Now to answer your questions: it's really up to the individual writers if a certain anime will get the coveted "recommended" status or not. It tends to only be given out to titles that truly deserve it, so we hope it will earn your trust as a way to check out some nice quality stuff. As for the manga previews we run, we leave most of the busy work in the capable hands of Jason Thompson, our manga

Hey *Otaku USA*! I love your magazine! It sure has a lot of info on new anime and manga. I love to check out new titles whenever I get a chance. I especially love *Sailor Moon Crystal* because it is based on the manga series. If you hear anything about a new season of *Sailor Moon Crystal*, please let it be one of your articles. Finally, I hope to see a picture of *Sailor Moon* and *Tuxedo Mask* in your magazine! "Moon Crystal Power! Make up!" You guys rock!

- Molly

*Sailor Moon Crystal*

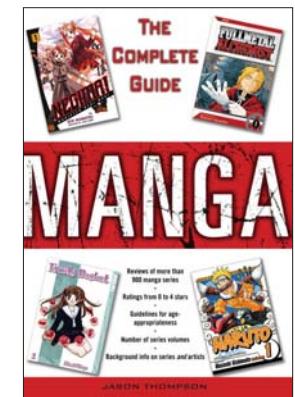


is that? How do you decide what manga to put into the magazine? Do they have a death battle? LOL. Thanks in advance!

- Kama

Hi Kama! Thanks for your message! We never thought we'd find ourselves at the grocery store either, somewhere between the frozen pizzas and pickle relish, but we're happy to

section editor. He works in contacting various manga company peeps to see what is available to run in our magazine. If Jason seems really good at his job, well, that's because he wrote a book called *Manga: The Complete Guide* and the cover is printed here for easy reference. Check it out for more groovy recommendations and thanks again! See you at the grocery store!



Hi Molly! Thanks for your letter and wild, unbridled enthusiasm for our magazine! It's a funny thing,... just as I sat down to answer your letter, the news just came out that *Sailor Moon Crystal* has just been renewed for a fourth season! Did your Moon Crystal Power make this miracle happen? Either way, here's a pic to celebrate and look for more *Sailor Moon* coverage from us soon!

And there you have it ... more lucky letters rescued from the mail sack. Now give us more! Please send your questions, comments, queries, requests, and assorted ephemera to [otakuusa@gmail.com](mailto:otakuusa@gmail.com)!

# Diabolik Lovers MORE BLOOD

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# Random Stuff for the J-Nerd Lifestyle

## Dress Like Your Favorite Pokémon Sun/Moon Starters with Official Hoodies



At this point you likely haven't just beaten *Pokémon Sun and Moon*, you've had time to demolish it in multiple ways and defend your title as Island Champion. With your catch 'em all hunger temporarily sated,



the only thing left to do is to tout your status in public with a set of hoodies from ThinkGeek. These official goods aren't just any old hoodies, they serve as the ultimate representation of your Starter Pokémon choice.

So, who did you end up going with at the beginning of *Sun and Moon*? Did you

go for the well-rounded, Grass-type reliability of Rowlet, or get into the meat of the action with Litten or Popplio? There's no wrong answer, no matter how much the

Internet attempts to convince you otherwise, but everyone has a preference. The hoodies can be yours for \$29.99, a price that is regularly discounted to \$19.99, so be on the lookout for some color-coordinated savings.



## Interviews with Monster Girls' Hikari Takanashi Comes to PVC Life

Did you keep up with winter's *Interviews with Monster Girls* anime, or the manga series by Petos on which it's based? Fans of

one and/or the other are in for a treat now that more merchandise has been rolling out, including a nice 1/7 scale PVC figure from Kotobukiya. The subject of this one is none other than Hikari Takanashi, one of the main heroines of the series, and her figure is set to be shipped in June.

Kotobukiya's Hikari figure comes in at ¥9,720 (about \$85), and includes a detachable school bag decorated with a

handful of detailed accessories. By the time you read this the anime adaptation will be far enough in the rearview to reflect upon, and hopefully we'll be seeing more of these figures in the meantime.



© Petos/Kodansha © Petos, kodansha/"Demi-chan wa Kataritai" Production Committee



## Tsunade Joins High-Quality "Naruto Gals" Figure Line

The next star in the "Naruto Gals" line of figures was recently determined, and Megahouse has 5th Hokage Tsunade joining in on the high-quality, pre-painted fun. Pre-orders opened at the top of 2017, with Tsunade's 200mm tall representation scheduled to arrive in late June.

With her detachable jacket in tow, Tsunade is available to pre-order for ¥9,250, which comes to about \$81. As the name suggests, the Naruto Gals line is all about representing the ladies of *Naruto Shippuden* in figure form. Prior to Tsunade, Megahouse kicked things off with a 200mm figure of Hinata Hyuga, which is currently set to arrive in March. She's available to order at a similar price point online.



© Masashi Kishimoto Scott/Shueisha, TV Tokyo, Pierrot

## Fan Favorites Unite for the iDOLM@STER: Cinderella Girls Statue

There are plenty of fan-favorite characters in mobile game *The iDOLM@STER: Cinderella Girls*, but you won't find a much more eye-popping pairing than Anzu Futaba and Kirari Moroboshi. That's because the former is an adorably tiny, 17-year-old NEET (voiced by Hiromi Igarashi), while the latter is six feet tall and growing (and is voiced by Rei Matsuzaki). The pair came together in a lovely illustration by Yusuke Matsuo on the fourth Blu-ray/DVD volume of the anime adaptation, and that depiction has since been immortalized in a bishojo statue from Phat! Company.



© NBGI/Project iM@S



This 1/8th scale figure has Anzu sitting on Kirari's lap and looking especially sleepy, complemented with a light color scheme that captures the atmosphere of the original illustration. Yusuke Matsuo sculpted the statue, with knead (Shoushin Murakawa) on paintwork. Pre-orders are now open for ¥17,800 (about \$156) before tax, with shipping planned for July 2017.

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## My Hero Academia Season I

### The heroes we deserve



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TV-14

Izuku Midoriya might be the most relatable shonen hero out there. After all, as much as we love characters like Luffy and Naruto, not many of us can relate to the desire to be the king of the pirates or the endless, fiery ambition to become the next Hokage. So what makes Izuku so special? It's not like we can just leap out of our windows at any moment and become bona fide superheroes. The catch with Izuku—the quality

that really puts him on our level—is the fact that he's just a straight-up, hardcore fan.

That's right, the star of *My Hero Academia* is a bona fide otaku, but not the type we normally see depicted in anime and manga. There are countless series, particularly in the realm of light novel adaptations, that feature a NEET, or hikikomori, protagonist. Izuku, on the other hand, is a fan of heroes in the same way a wrestling fan might have that one spandex-clad suplexer they obsess over day and night. He longs to be as strong and selfless as the number one hero, All Might, but there's one major

roadblock standing between Izuku and his dreams: He has no powers.

In the world of *My Hero Academia*, more people are born with powers, known as Quirks, than without. That makes Izuku the exception to the rule, and it's what keeps him watching the same old YouTube videos of heroic acts rather than committing them himself. Despite that major handicap, though, Izuku remains as determined as ever to make it as a hero, and that's why manga author Kohei Horikoshi's series is currently near the top of the shonen heap. It's as far from wish fulfillment as you can get. Izuku has to scrape and scrap for every inch of purchase in the world of superheroics, and even the assistance he gets along the way brings with it its own body-crushing caveats.

The assistance in question comes from none other than the aforementioned hero among heroes, All Might. He's one of many colorful characters introduced in the first season of *My Hero Academia*, which features more unique heroes per episode than most comics churn out in an entire run. We covered some of these—from the frog-like Tsuyu Asui to the literally-bird-headed Fumikage Tokoyami—in our previous feature on the series (see our February 2017 issue for the cover story). The bottom line is that Horikoshi's fantastic original character designs are even more impressive in animated form, thanks to both anime character designer Yoshihiko Umakoshi (*Berserk*, *Air*



*Master*) and the seriously amazing work of production studio BONES.

BONES has quickly become one of my favorite anime studios, especially in the last few years. *My Hero Academia* is among its strongest works, thanks in no small part to the efforts of director Kenji Nagasaki (*No. 6, Gundam Build Fighters*) and series composition writer Yousuke Kuroda (*Trigun, Jormungand*). It's clear the staff really gets what makes *My Hero Academia* special, and they don't mess with a good thing too much outside of delivering one of the best looking animated series of 2016. The full 13-episode run is fluid and exciting, proving that the world of *My Hero Academia* was really meant for full-color action.

Despite the fact that it's a continuing series, *My Hero Academia* makes for a great single-season watch, and it's absolutely worth owning. By the time you read this, the wait for Season 2 will nearly be over, but you'll still have plenty of time to get in a few marathons of this excellent first outing in the meantime. **Recommended.**

- Joseph Luster

# Girls Beyond the Wasteland

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# Girls und Panzer der Film

## A never-say-die spirit

It takes a special breed of villainous bureaucrat to renege on a promise to a group of high school girls after they've just won the athletic championship that was supposed to save their school from closing down, but that's exactly the premise that puts the wheels (or in this case, the tank treads) in motion in *Girls und Panzer der Film*.

In *Girls und Panzer*, an original 2012 TV anime with direction by Tsutomu Mizushima and animation by Actas, the members of the Oarai Girls High School tankery teams band together against great odds to defeat the reigning "senshado" champions in a last-ditch effort to save their high school. In *Girls und Panzer der Film*, a 2015 theatrical movie that picks up where the TV series leaves off, main character and reluctant scion to the Nishizumi school of tank combat Miho Nishizumi is at it again. It turns out that the verbal agreement to keep Oarai High open isn't the worth the nonexistent paper that it's printed on, and as a result the school is going to shut down and the tankery teams will be disbanded. The girls of Oarai High must once again team up to challenge a vastly superior foe: if Miho and company can defeat a professional caliber, college-level tankery team in a grueling annihilation match, they will save their beloved high school once and for all. Outnumbered and outgunned, will the girls and their panzers be able to pull off another stunning victory?

*Girls und Panzer* is a great show, full of masterfully executed action set pieces and comedic beats, so it's not a knock to say that *Girls und Panzer der Film* is more of the same, albeit with a two-hour run time and a movie-caliber budget. The plot is just a flimsy excuse for more tank-battle shenanigans, as a cast of dozens of colorful characters—from the hall monitors of Mallard Team to the military history otaku of Hippo Team to the stereotypically foreign teams from rival schools—engage in the traditionally feminine sport of tankery. Since *Girls und Panzer der Film* is a direct sequel, it doesn't spend a lot of time explaining key details, such as Miho's strained relationship with her elder sister and her mother, the nature of the carrier ship high schools, or the fundamentals of "senshado" competition. The film assumes that you're already familiar with the setting, characters, and

conflicts of the television series, so it's not really the best jumping off point for someone who is new to *Girls und Panzer*.

That being said, the action sequences that book-end the film are spectacular. *Girls und Panzer der Film* opens with an exhibition match that destroys most of downtown Oarai, while the movie concludes with an annihilation match that runs wild within an abandoned theme park. The editing and camerawork in these scenes are exceptional, especially the point-of-view shots



that thrust the audience into the turrets of the dueling tanks. And like the earlier anime, *Girls und Panzer der Film* makes use of director Mizushima's sharp sense of comedic timing. One of my favorite additions is a mascot character named Punchy who is beloved by both Miho and the rival team captain, Alice Shimada. In a microcosm of the never-say-die spirit of the series, Punchy is a teddy

bear whose chief strength is his ability to endure being walloped.

*Girls und Panzer der Film* proved remarkably popular during its theatrical run in Japan, which lasted more than a year and garnered more than 2.4 billion yen in ticket sales. Now Sentai Filmworks is bringing the further adventures of the Oarai Girls High School tankery teams to North



© GIRLS und PANZER Film Projekt



American home video, and like the earlier releases of the *Girls und Panzer* TV series and OAVs, the film includes a well-produced English dub as well as the original Japanese language track. I highly recommend it to anyone who is already familiar with the charming combination of sports competition and moe military anime that is *Girls und Panzer*.

- Paul Thomas Chapman



STUDIO/COMPANY  
Section23 Films/Sentai

AVAILABLE  
May

RATING  
14+

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# Attack on Titan: Junior High

## Turning dark fantasy into black comedy



**STUDIO/COMPANY**  
Production I.G./Funimation  
**AVAILABLE**  
Now  
**RATING**  
Not Rated

When *Attack on Titan* first crashed onto the manga and anime scene, fans were blown away by Hajime Isayama's detailed world, brutal outlook on humanity, and willingness to kill seemingly important characters. So naturally, as fans wait for more *Attack on Titan* anime, what's the best thing to tide them over?

That's right. *The Attack on Titan* kids, except in middle school!

Saki Nakagawa's manga, adapted into a 12-episode series of anime shorts by Production I.G. back in 2015, transforms the dour soldiers of *Attack on Titan* into pudgy, chibi-fied middle schoolers at an otherwise normal school housing both human and titan students. They struggle with the challenges of winning dodgeball matches and cleaning the school building rather than witnessing giant humanoid monsters eviscerate their friends and family. All things considered, it's a step up.

© Saki Nakagawa, Hajime Isayama, KODANSHA/"ATTACK ON TITAN: Junior High" Production Committee. Licensed by Funimation® Productions, Ltd. All Rights Reserved.

It would seem like a winning strategy, considering *Attack on Titan*'s wealth of beloved characters: Mikasa the silent but brilliant sol-



dier, Jean the arrogant would-be leader, Sasha the overeating ditz. But unfortunately, Isayama doesn't have much of a mind for comedy, and the poorly timed jokes in the original *Attack on Titan* rarely land in a way that evokes much more than an awkward chuckle. In *Junior High*, repetition reveals Isayama's characters for the shallow caricatures they are, or at least shows a

comedy severely handicapped by its inability to reveal more about its characters than its source material. Almost every character has only one joke, repeated ad nauseum. Sasha likes to eat in the original? She talks about food in every scene in *Junior High*. Oruo bites his tongue a few times? Every Oruo punchline in *Junior High* ends with him biting his tongue. This sort of ref-



# Ajin: Demi-Human

## More human than human

What if you were just going about your day-to-day business, only to suddenly find out you're not human? Not only that, but you're a dangerous, immortal non-human, which means the government suddenly wants you in a lab with a barrel to your temple. That's what Kei Nagai is going through at the moment, with suits coming for him from one side while a supposed group of similarly inhuman revolutionaries rally on the other. This is the basic setup for Gamon Sakurai's *Ajin: Demi-Human*, and the anime adaptation is well worth your time.

The title *Ajin* refers to the aforementioned inhuman curiosities, a group Kei Nagai now finds himself reluctantly joining. As far as the general public is concerned, Ajin are monsters who can't be killed by any means, even if they appear normal on the outside. That's one of the reasons everyone is so freaked out when Kei

gets creamed by a delivery truck and stands right back up like nothing happened. Run an Ajin over, blow their brains out, or choke them until they pass out, and they'll be back on their feet before you have time to process the deaths. Even further shrouded in mystery is their ability to summon bandaged, otherworldly creatures to their side, a power that eventually serves as a method of combat between rival Ajin.

The *Ajin: Demi-Human* anime sticks pretty close to the story of Sakurai's beautifully illustrated manga, which follows Kei and a few other key characters as they evade officials, get caught up in terrorist plots, and use their immortality to their advantage in spectacularly violent ways. It's not surprising that director Hiroyuki Seshita (*Blame!*,



**STUDIO/COMPANY**  
Sentai Filmworks  
**AVAILABLE**  
Now  
**RATING**  
TV-MA



© Gamon Sakurai, Kodansha Ltd. / Ajin Management Committee

erence comedy can be funny the first time you spot it, but after a few loops the merry-go-round just makes you sick.

The references that work are the more subtle ones that call back to specific scenes from the anime—in one scene, Armin defends Eren's campaign for student council president using language that mirrors his speech at the end of the first anime season. The maneuver gear training sequence isn't a part of military training, but the initiation for the "Wall Cleaning Club." These

for people already familiar with *Attack on Titan*. It doesn't spoil anything big from the first anime season, but most of its comedy relies on recognizing references to the original series. Plus, there are hints to some big twists from both the anime and manga if you're paying attention.

Of course, I have a bit of a soft spot for hamburgers in anime (I run a whole panel about them at conventions!) so *Attack on Titan: Junior High* gets some extra credit for revealing via a series of recurring jokes that Eren's driving motivation was never, in fact, killing the Titans, but recovering cheeseburgers that they stole from him. A man after my own heart.

Isayama is notorious for being unable to draw convincing human beings, and Nakagawa's art in the *Junior High* manga isn't much better, but the anime designs are probably the best these characters have ever looked. They're instantly recognizable, but the rounder, more evenly proportioned designs are easier on the eyes than their original incarnations.



scenes are often accompanied by short lapses into Isayama's gaunt art style, a welcome contrast that makes the jokes a lot funnier.

With that in mind, this is absolutely a series



## ONLINE EXCLUSIVE:

*Attack on Titan Junior High* offered up its own comedic spin on the main series, so find out if *Assassination Classroom* managed to do the same with its spinoff, only at [www.otakuusamagazine.com!](http://www.otakuusamagazine.com)

*Junior High* is at its best when turning *Attack on Titan*'s dark fantasy roots toward black comedy, transmuting the Titans from terrifying monsters into comic figures. Unfortunately, that's not enough to make it either a particularly funny comedy or a suitable substitute for *Titan*-starved fans. In fact, *Junior High* spends so much time making fun of its characters that, by the end, you might come to the (correct) conclusion that Eren is a whiny baby who can only be tolerated on-screen when he's the butt of a joke, thus spoiling the fun of any future *Attack on Titan* anime series.

- Evan Minto



*Knights of Sidonia: Battle for Planet Nine*) and the Polygon Pictures staff remain faithful to the source material, because Sakurai's layouts come pretty close to being straight-up animation on occasion. I wasn't even convinced that the manga needed to be animated when I first heard about the adaptation, but I'm glad they went through with the film and TV takes on the material in the end.

I'm a little more divided on Polygon Pictures' style, however. Like any production it has its ups and downs, and sometimes it tricks you into thinking it isn't all built on the framework of frequently stilted, sterile computer graphics. Even after soaking in the whole series, I'm still of the mind that this style is more suited to

something like *Knights of Sidonia*. Implementing an aesthetic that serves to heighten the already sterile world of *Sidonia* just makes sense, whereas most everything about *Ajin* is fluid, and the action is dynamic. So yeah, the visuals don't always work, but when they do it can be pretty special. They nail enough of the key gut-punch moments of the narrative to make it work.

One advantage the anime has over the manga is the characterization of the lead character. Maybe it was just the bumpy nature of the first couple volumes, but Kei Nagai never really seemed to have much personality. He started out as a vessel for the plot rather than someone with an interesting background, and

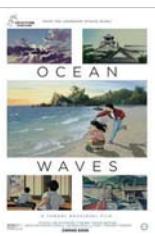
was quickly overshadowed by side characters, from his friend and accomplice Kaito to the colorful, downright scary members of the pro-*Ajin* movement. The anime benefits from knowing more about Kei right from the start, so we're introduced to a character with a plight for which we might at least feel a shred of sympathy.

*Ajin* moves through its story at a pretty rapid pace, making it ideal for the binge-or-die nature of its home on Netflix. Both seasons are now available to watch, with a home video release on the way from Sentai Filmworks, so go ahead and kick back for a rollercoaster ride of a marathon.

- Joseph Luster

# Ocean Waves

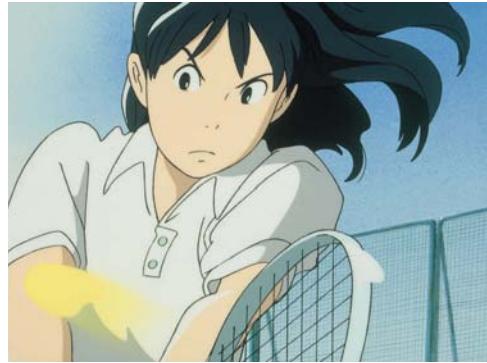
## Well meaning and hard working



STUDIO/COMPANY  
GKIDS  
AVAILABLE  
Now  
RATING  
PG-13

In 1993, Studio Ghibli teamed up with Nippon Television in a project designed to give younger animators a platform with which to express themselves artistically. The result was *Ocean Waves* (known in Japan as *Umi ga Kikoeru*, or "I Can Hear the Sea"), an animated television film with direction by Tomomi Mochizuki that is based on the novel by Saeko Himura. A very low-key and unassuming film, *Ocean Waves* tells the story of Rikako Muto, a transfer student who moves from Tokyo to Kochi after her parents go through a messy divorce. Beautiful, athletic, and academically accomplished, Muto immediately catches the eyes of both the main character Taku Morisaki, a well-meaning and hard-working but unexceptional student, and his best friend, Yutaka Matsuno, an overachiever. As Muto, Morisaki, and Matsuno begin their final semesters in high school and prepare for their college entrance exams, a tenuous love triangle develops between them.

Viewers who are used to the visionary flights of fancy pioneered by Ghibli co-founders Hayao Miyazaki and Isao Takahata might not know what to make of *Ocean Waves*. Unlike *Spirited Away* or *The Tale of Princess Kaguya*, *Ocean Waves* is a supremely understated film in terms of its visuals, its plot, and its score. *Ocean Waves* also leans heavily on subtext and the intricacies of how Japanese people communicate socially to tell its story, and some of the subtler character moments may end up being lost in translation. For example, Morisaki and Matsuno both speak in Tosa dialect, which sounds a bit rustic to the ears of Muto, who considers herself a sophisti-



© 1993 Saeko Himuro – Studio Ghibli – N



# Inari Kon Kon: The Complete Series

## Something pure and innocent



STUDIO/COMPANY  
FUNimation  
AVAILABLE  
Now  
RATING  
TV-PG

*Inari Kon Kon* begins with one of the more interesting premises out there, especially when it comes to romantic comedies. As a result, it's an entirely different beast than most of what's on the market, and deserves your time and attention, especially if you like your romantic comedies and slice of life shows a little yuri-flavored.

The tale follows middle school student Inari Fushimi, who's got her own set of typical middle school problems. She's not great with showing others how she feels, and she's especially broken up about a boy she likes who she just can't seem to confess her feelings to. It seems like a typical story where the heroine doesn't know how to carry herself or how to speak to others, but there's an important twist.



Because Inari can't possibly tell the boy she likes how she feels, her life goes through some massive changes. But when it seems another girl has beaten her to it, she's brokenhearted, crying out to God and whoever



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cated urbanite and reflects this attitude in her Tokyo dialect. Even between Morisaki and Matsuno, who share a common syntax and vocabulary, there are subtle distinctions that inform their characters: Morisaki's speech is more casual and direct, while Matsuno's speech is more formal and proper. Dialogue is only half of the equation, though, because the importance of many scenes hinges specifically on what is not said aloud.

If *Ocean Waves* can be said to have a single defining characteristic, it's the film's strong sense of cinematic naturalism. This naturalism features prominently not only in the performances of the voice actors, but also in the structure of the plot. For a film that is about an unlikely high school romance, *Ocean Waves* does not romanticize the lives of its teenage protagonists. Every

important character is portrayed as a realistically flawed bundle of adolescent nerves. For example, Rikako Muto, the exotic transfer student, is horribly self-absorbed, manipulative to a fault, and emotionally compromised by the trauma of the break-up of her family. Taku Morisaki is loyal to his friends, but he often sticks his foot in his mouth and says the exact wrong thing to defuse a situation when emotions run high. The dramatic incidents in *Ocean Waves* are similarly ordinary: bruised egos, broken friendships, mean-spirited rumors, and social ostracism make up the external sources of conflict. A few half-hearted slaps and a sucker-punch thrown in anger are as high as the stakes escalate. With age and wisdom, the characters are ultimately able to sort out their differences like adults.

As both an experiment to train up a younger

generation of animators and as a movie, *Ocean Waves* yielded mixed results. The film came in overdue and overbudget during its initial television release and received only middling marks from critics. Now nearly a quarter century later, *Ocean Waves* is finally seeing an official English language release from GKIDS. I maintain that *Ocean Waves* is worth watching at least once, especially for serious film buffs who want to experience something radically different from the rest of the Ghibli canon. For more casual Ghibli fans, the film will likely only hold value as a historical curiosity, as here Mochizuki's story may be too subtle and Mochizuki's visuals may be too subdued for viewers raised on decades of boundary-pushing animation from the likes of Miyazaki and Takahata.

- Paul Thomas Chapman

can hear her for help to make things better.

Someone answers her prayers—but it's Uka, a special guardian deity who wants to grant her wish, so Inari asks that Uka turn her into the girl that the boy she likes might have eyes on. She realizes this is a mistake, however, and in the end Uka gives her part of her life essence, which allows her to transform into any human form. Thus, Inari is able to learn about opening herself, loving others, and being true to her heart, even when she's transformed into someone else.

From there, *Inari Kon Kon* itself turns into something pure and innocent, exploring Inari's life as she navigates friendships, relationships, and even her life with Uka. You might be quick to judge with several of the characters, but each has a warm and inviting personality in addition to the world of the gods, which Inari ends up exploring by way of Uka.

It's engaging watching them grow ever closer, and despite the somewhat motherly tone Uka takes with Inari, one can't help but shake the impression of a love that may be brewing between the two of them. There's even more of a yuri presence with one of Inari's classmates, but it can't hold a candle to the relationship that

takes center stage.

It's not only the relationships and plot threads that keep you watching; the animation is absolutely gorgeous as well. Inari herself has a unique appearance and look



that's unlike most of the other "goddess" characters you typically see in these types of shows, and Inari is a breath of fresh air. Even the secondary characters get a chance to shine.

Overall, *Inari Kon Kon* is a sugary sweet watch with a candy-coated, warm center. A



lovable cast, a relatable catalyst for the adventure to begin, and issues viewers can sympathize with make for a heart-warming narrative that'll stick with you long after you take it in. Unlike Inari, you don't have to be careful what you wish for with this

show. It's a wish come true.

- Brittany Vincent

## Clockwork and Flowers

### Spring 2017 Manga Reviews



#### Ichi-F: A Worker's Graphic Memoir of the Fukushima Nuclear Power Plant

Kazuto Tatsuta is a middle-aged man from Tokyo who became determined to work cleaning up the infamous Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant after it was severely damaged in the March 2011 tsunami. *Ichi-F* describes his everyday life in Fukushima, from the mundanity of apartment hunting with other men his age to the specifics of putting on a protective mask without giving himself a headache. It is autobiographical, though Tatsuta's name is a pseudonym and most details are anonymized.



PUBLISHER  
Kodansha

STORY AND ART  
Kazuto Tatsuta

RATING  
13+

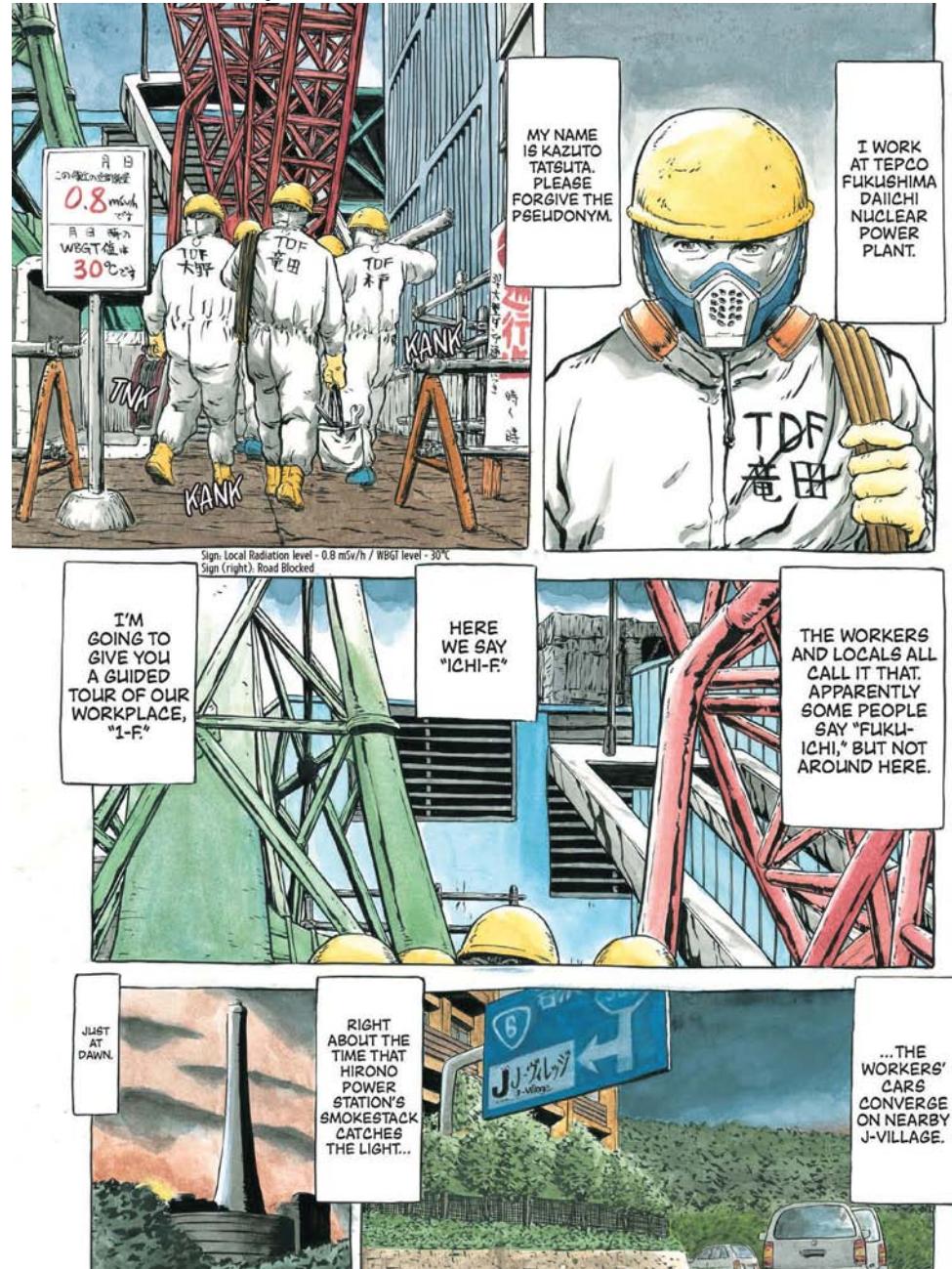
manga offers far more diversity than anime and *Ichi-F* is a fascinating example of what slice of life can offer: real insight into the lives of those occupying unusual positions, viewing the world from a rare perspective. Some will find this slow-paced and boring. Others will be absorbed in the extensive explanation of life in this most exceptional of circumstances.

*Ichi-F* is slice of life in the truest sense; there is no story arc or character development, just a man dipping into his memories and relaying one incident at a time. The exciting incidents, such as taking on a high-risk job, he brings down to earth by outlining the processes around them. The banal incidents, such as looking for a new job, he adds color to by explaining the complicated system of contractors and subcontractors requiring him to meet rival potential employers in secret as if for a drug deal.

As an artist, Tatsuta's biggest problem is with people. Facial expressions are often a little rough, overly similar, not as expressive as they could be, while comedic moments are underwhelming. In this particular manga that's not too much of a problem, though. It's fortunate that the characters spend so much time in masks, or surrounded by much more interesting backgrounds that Tatsuta renders in beautiful detail.

Detail is where Tatsuta excels. His art of the power plant, safety equipment and scenery is

Ichi-F ©Kazuto Tatsuta/Kodansha, Ltd. All rights reserved.



rich, while his explanations are thorough and clear, often making use of little maps or diagrams. This is no textbook though. His internal monologue expresses frustration with the urban legends surrounding the plant, sympathy for coworkers who lost their homes in the tsunami,

even agonizing over an itchy nose once sealed into a mask and surrounded by dangerous radiation levels. This is a very human look at a sensationalized issue, and Tatsuta's approach is level headed and informative without being dry. **Recommended.** (Amelia Cook)



# Is the Order a Rabbit??

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### Clockwork Planet

*Clockwork Planet* lists “manga by” and “character design by” and it feels like a manga weirdly shaped by opposing forces.

The story takes place on a literal clockwork planet, made of springs and gears after Earth is destroyed. That’s at least two big science fictional ideas tossed out in the first seven pages of comic script—concepts that would have taken up many more words in a prose story by, say, Yoshio Aramaki, or in the series of

light novels this manga was based upon. I confess that I was both fascinated and repelled by a gear-based planet. On one hand it’s cute to take the steampunk aesthetic to its logical conclusion, but on the other hand my inner hard SF reader was screaming, “If you’re building a planet to replace a dead Earth, where in the name of Robert A. Heinlein is your workbench?”

While the problems of living on a giant clock are addressed eventually, the beginning of the story deals with lonely young genius Naoto Miuru, who finds and repairs Ryuzu, a clockwork girl. This leads to a perfectly serviceable (even somewhat touching) magical girl plot. It’s not bad, but it seemed an awful waste of world building to just throw in stock characters. The story gets more interesting later on when we meet the character Marie: her membership in the “Meistier’s Guild” gives the reader a frightening

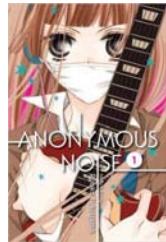
#### PUBLISHER

Kodansha  
STORY  
Yuu Kamiya & Tsubaki Himana

#### CHARACTER DESIGN

Shino  
MANGA  
Kuro  
RATING  
13+

look into the political machinery (pun intended) that runs Clockwork Planet. Marie may be tough, smart, and incorruptible but she is up against people who can control gravity itself. I know Marie’s story will continue to dovetail with the more romantic plot as the series goes on, but I hope the writer knows to keep the emphasis on Marie, the politics and SF aspects rather than just the magical girlfriend. (Robert McCarthy)



#### PUBLISHER

Viz  
STORY AND ART  
Ryoko Fukuyama

#### RATING

13+

feelings at the beach, where she can scream as much as she wants.

It’s at the beach that she meets Yuzu, a short boy with long eyelashes and a pile of sheet music. Yuzu is in fifth grade but already writing songs and is delighted when Nino begins to sing them for him. However, one day he also disappears without a word, and Nino—or “Alice” as Yuzu called her—is left alone. Until her first day of high school, when Nino sees a short boy with long eyelashes playing the guitar ...

There’s a lot of backstory to get through before

the real plot of *Anonymous Noise* can begin, and author Ryoko Fukuyama frontloads all of it. This is probably its biggest weakness, as the first half of the book speeds through the lives of three small children without any time to build them as individual characters or invest in either of the relationships. This is a nonissue when Nino gets to high school, but for the first half of the first book in a series to be solid prologue is a big ask of new readers.

Once the second half begins the real outlines of this story appear: unrequited love triangle + anonymous, mask-wearing band = emotional rivalry and personal growth. It’s a reliable foundation with shades of *Chihayafuru*, another beloved and successful story with a long childhood flashback to get through. The characters are a little melodramatic but certainly not bland, and the hints we get of who they will be once fully fleshed out suggest the intermittently cliché dialogue and rough artwork will be worth wading through as Fukuyama’s style matures.

Besides, *Anonymous Noise* is published in shōjo powerhouse *Hana to Yume*, boasts 11 volumes to date, has an anime airing this April and a live action film due this November. This mountain of credibility will go a long way to convincing readers past a fairly shaky start, and while very little of this story is original this particular combination of elements is at least engaging. (Amelia Cook)



### BLAME! Master Edition

In an unknown time, in an unknown place, a man with a gun explores an infinite building. Endless miles of rusty girders, abandoned and automated factories, a metal catacomb with no sky and no exit: this is the Megastructure, an infinite dungeon where what you think are twinkling stars are just lamps in the ceiling, far away. Armed with his

Graviton Beam Emitter, the mysterious Kyrii walks alone through this maze, where the scattered remnants of humanity eke out a living in the darkness and rust. But they’re not alone: a whole ecosystem thrives here, an ecosystem of giant metal-eating worms, tentacled monsters, and the dreaded Safeguards, whose goal is to eradicate humans. Fighting his way from room to room, Kyrii’s goal is to find a living human with the Net Terminal Genes that can access the Megastructure’s control system ... and perhaps stop the endless, mindless expansion of the ever-growing city. But his journey will be long, because the Megastructure is big: bigger than the Earth itself, big with rooms the size of planets, a dark universe that may have already consumed the sun and now reaches for the stars ...

Many fans discovered Nihei’s work through



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*Knights of Sidonia*, but *Blame!*, his first long manga, is a stunning introduction to this artist's visual and conceptual imagination. Spurning accessible tropes like mecha pilots and high schools, *Blame!* is a deep dive into sci-fi weirdness, with only Kyrii and the occasional traveling companion for company, and with little explanation or exposition: we slowly learn about the world from scattered dialogue. Mostly, it's about the setting: pages and pages of fantastic architectural artwork, giant machines that dwarf tiny human figures. But it's also full of great action scenes: fights with ever-mutating H.R. Giger-inspired monsters and cliffhanger escapes that turn this dungeon dystopia into the greatest platform game ever made. Vertical's oversize omnibus collection prints the art in the large size that its detail deserves, making this a book you'll flip through again and again: longing to be caught in Nihei's world, yearning to figure out its puzzles.

**Recommended.** (Jason Bradley Thompson)

### Death March to the Parallel World Rhapsody

Ichirou Suzuki, a 29-year-old programmer, is on a "death march" to make the release date on "War World," a browser-based RPG. After 30 hours working nonstop, he falls asleep at his desk and finds himself in the world of the game, alone in a wasteland under attack by an army of lizardmen! At first startled, Ichirou soon discov-

ers he doesn't have anything to worry about: he's an insanely powerful Level 310 character, and he's even de-aged back to a teenager as if this wasn't wish-fulfillment enough already. After making short he soon meets his first human inhabitant of this world, the earnest, pure-hearted young "magic knight" Zena Marientell. Zena and her soldiers lead Ichirou to the nearest town, where he checks into an inn and begins to learn about this strange new land: the people, the



PUBLISHER

Yen Press

STORY

Hiro Aianana

ART

Ayamegumu

CHARACTER DESIGN

Shri

RATING

13+

laws, the currency, the food, the pretty girls ("If she were a little younger, she'd be right in my strike zone!") and just about everything you can think of, seen through the eyes of a privileged tourist.

One thing that makes *Death March* stand out from other "trapped in an online RPG" fantasies is that Ichirou still sees all the "game elements": he can't log off, but he can see the in-game icons and status monitors, he can carry infinite items without being burdened, and there's an increasingly tedious in-joke of gaining and allocating skill points. (When Ichirou lies to someone, we see the pop-up "Skill Acquired:

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Making Excuses.") In fact, things like "Level" are real to the people of "War World," too ("It's rare to see an adult who's still Level 1. You must've been sheltered"), an odd choice since the manga strains to convince us of the realism of its setting in other ways. All this unfunny self-referentiality puts an extra barrier between the reader and the story, destroying immersion as we're not imagining being in a fantasy world, we're imagining being a 29-year-old tech bro playing a fantasy RPG, with the bonus of infinite cheat codes. The nigh-omnipotent, emotionally undeveloped Ichirou comes off as nothing more than a reader-insert, and far too much of the world is described through data dumps, to the point that *Death March* comes off as more of a game wiki than a story. (Actual dialogue: "Hell demons can only be harmed by magic or magical weapons. The intermediate ones have higher resistance to magic, so weak spells won't work on them.") Author Hiro Ainan would clearly rather be designing or playing a RPG than telling a story, and, frankly, I'd rather be too instead of reading this dull manga. This is the kind of ultra-generic portal fantasy that makes me realize *Overlord* is actually pretty good. (Jason Bradley Thompson)

### The Girl From the Other Side

In a leafy, fairy-tale setting, ordinary people live in fear of encountering the Outsiders, shadowy monsters whose touch is cursed. Shiva, an aban-



PUBLISHER  
Seven Seas

STORY AND ART  
Nagabe

RATING  
All Ages

doned little girl, lives in the forest with a nameless Outsider, a tall, spiral-horned beast in an elegant waistcoat.

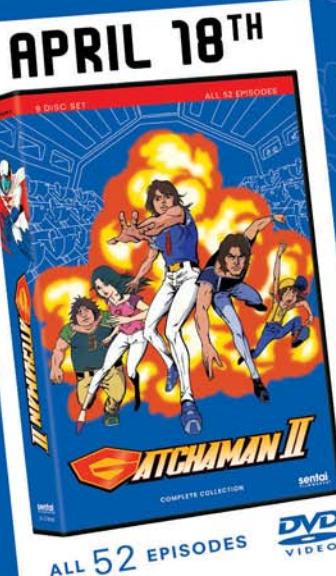
Although caregiver and child are unable to touch, they forge a pleasant life together, scavenging from abandoned villages, holding tea parties, taking walks in the rain, and burning pies. Meanwhile, in the neighboring walled city,

paranoia about contamination from the Outsiders grows.

Soldiers begin to patrol the woods, hostile Outsiders stalk the night, and it seems like only a matter of time before the protagonists' fragile peace is shattered.

This is a quietly stunning manga, a melancholy fable that reads like a half-remembered children's book or a folktale from another world. Nagabe's delicate storybook art mixes elements of old shōjo manga with classical European children's illustration. Shiva is an achingly beautiful child with big dark eyes, while the Outsider's beaky face suggests a mash-up of Victorian illustrator Aubrey Beardsley and splatterground artist Ralph Steadman. The characters wander through a world of keenly observed, deftly inked details: farmhouse kitchens, trees in the rain, old boots. *The Girl From the Other Side*

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doesn't look or feel quite like any other manga. It's the kind of book you dream of reading on a long evening under a comfortable quilt, then passing along to a smart and lucky child.

**Recommended.** (Shaenon K. Garrity)



PUBLISHER  
Viz

STORY AND ART  
Chiho Saito & Be-Papas  
RATING  
16+

Rebellious Utene Tenjou's world is turned upside down when her interior decorator aunt decides they will move to Amsterdam. Utene has received a letter every year from Mr. Licky Lick, the childhood hero she hopes to reunite with someday, but her friend Kaido tries to convince her this man doesn't exist.

Utene even starts to believe him, until she meets her

aunt's handsome assistant, Aoi Wakaohji ...

Sound familiar? If you know *Utena* through its seminal anime, probably not. Even when this prologue ends and Utene makes it to Ohtori Academy, this is not the *Utena* lauded as a masterpiece. The manga is neither source material nor adaptation, with both anime and manga created by different members of art collective Be-Papas. However, the chances of anyone picking these books up today without high expectations set by the anime are slim to none, so they must

be judged in that context.

Many elements are the same. Utene was saved as a child by a man whose face she can't remember, a prince who inspired her to become a princess herself and save others instead. She becomes a duellist, battling members of the student council to save the Rose Bride, the mysterious Anthy Himemiya. Significant points are different, though. The manga resolves the story between Utene and Anthy halfway through its second volume, then adds on separate chapters adapting entire anime arcs into smaller, barely connected stories. Major characters in the anime are absent, appear only briefly, or have unrecognizable personalities or backstories. This version is considerably more heterosexual.

Most noticeably, the manga lacks both the artistry and absurdity of the anime. The softened shōjo aesthetic contains only glimpses of the anime's bold visuals, and cramming so much story into just two volumes (even omnibus-size volumes) leaves little room for individual quirks or comedic supporting characters. Interesting narrative devices like the Greek chorus-like shadow girls are gone. The final chapter covering *The Adolescence of Utene* is much closer to the anime's tone but stops short of the extraordinary climax.

Overall, this manga is best viewed as complementary to the anime, paring down an extended ensemble and sprawling story to a more

straightforward alternative version of a well-known classic. It does hold some really beautiful scenes and intriguing possibilities, though, and some readers may actually find it a more accessible route into the *Utena* universe than a 39-episode spectacle of subtext and surrealism from 20 years ago. (Amelia Cook)



PUBLISHER  
Yen Press

STORY AND ART  
Jun Mochizuki  
RATING  
16+

**The Case Study of Vanitas**  
Jun Mochizuki, best known as the creator of *Pandora Hearts*, specializes in gothic fantasy with an elegant Victorian veneer. Her newest series, *The Case Study of Vanitas*, adds two closely related tropes: steampunk and vampires. In an alternate 19th-century Paris with flying cities and clockwork technology, vampires are real but mostly harmless, having been driven underground by the human majority. Vanitas, a cocky "vampire doctor," roams the nighttime streets, magically curing vampires who become overwhelmed by bloodlust and turn to killing. He's joined on his rounds by Noé, an upright young vampire following rumors about the strange book Vanitas uses to perform his cures. Does it contain the secret to vampires' salvation, or does it spread their curse?

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This being a fantasy manga, there are further complications, including name-based magic spells, political tensions between the human and vampire communities in Paris, and a shadowy monster lurking about, giggling. But for the most part this is a refreshingly straightforward story, building episodic adventures on the solid foundation of two pretty men helping vampires be less bitey. The other draw is the manga's romantic faux-Victorian setting, festooned with lace, bows, stained glass, polished gears, and other hand-cramping details (drawn, as the endnotes admit, by Mochizuki's beleaguered assistants).

Mochizuki's love of all things French comes through, with flowery Parisian street scenes and

characters named after historical figures like Joan of Arc and Manet.

*The Case Study of Vanitas* is a feather-light soufflé of a manga. Underneath the steampunk style, it's not much more than a standard fighting-fantasy manga with a little eye candy for the fangirls. But if it's not filling, it's sweet and attractive. (Shaenon K. Garrity)

### There's a Demon Lord on the Floor

Reminiscent of *The Devil Is a Part-Timer*, *There's a Demon Lord on the Floor* follows the long tradition of supernatural creatures having to get a real job. Amon Patricia, the Lord of the Demons, is exiled and winds up on Earth, living in

the basement of a family restaurant called Humming Dining. Demons can only go for so long without food so she applies for a job at the restaurant. The much diminished Demon Lord looks like a 12-year-old girl, but give her food and she fills out into a curvaceous demoness built for fan service.

Like all demonesses built for fan service, she has to make some Joe Blow's life hell. Enter Kouichi, Humming's 17-year-old assistant manager and/or cook. His food, at least according to all the female characters in the book, is orgasmic. It gives the demons the power boost they need to ... well, mostly turn into tall, busty women and make Kouichi's life ... interesting.

*Demon Lord* has plenty of light slapstick but no plot. No enemy shows up to make trouble, there are no other Demon Lords to challenge Amon's position, and virtually each chapter introduces a new cute girl to the storyline (or "storyline"). The drama mostly revolves around cozy domestic topics such as the staff going to a festival for



PUBLISHER  
Seven Seas

STORY AND ART  
Kawakami Masaki

RATING  
13+

restaurants and the quest for the limited item that comes with the kids' meal. Even the arrival of a shrine maiden (the traditional enemy of demons) doesn't bring out any conflicts because she wants to befriend demons instead of vanquish them. Perhaps Volume 2 will introduce a conflict bigger than demon knight Inazagi's social anxiety and inability to wait tables.

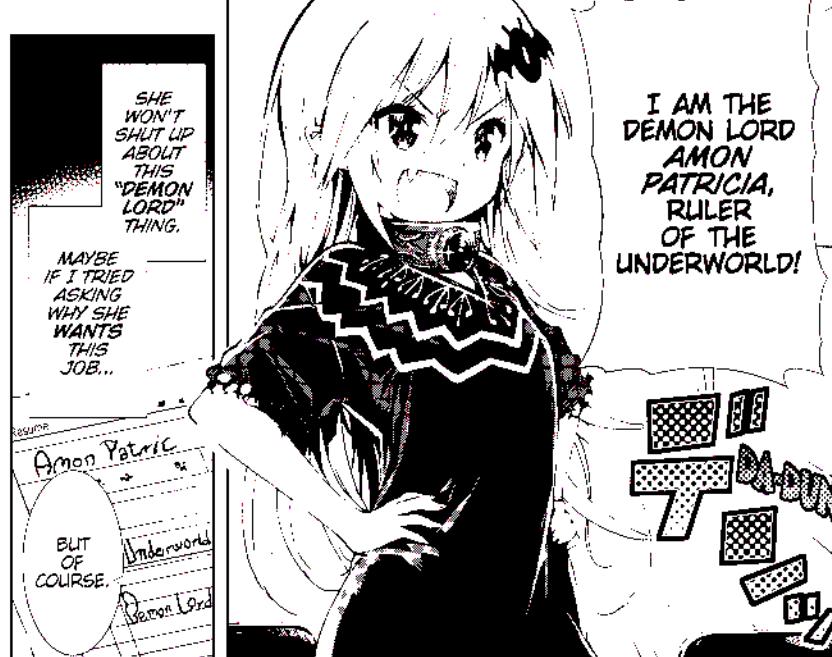
The art is pure moe: lots of bouncing breasts, all of which are covered just enough for the Teen age rating. It's all wasted on Kouichi, although to be fair, his bland and businesslike reactions to all the near-nudity around him is almost funny ... or would be if the book was more ambitious and Kouichi better developed as a character. The slick art is good looking but hard to follow at times, as if actions have to be crammed in just to get to the next shot of Amon's adult form in lingerie. And all the artistic skill in the world can't make up for the lack of story. *Demon Lord* feels more like a product made by a focus group trying to find a marketable product than it does any sort of artistic endeavor. (Che Gilson)

### Bungo Stray Dogs

Starving on a riverbank after he was kicked out of his orphanage, desperate young Atsushi vows to rob the next person he meets, so he'll have money to live. Instead, he ends up saving a drowning man, and the man turns out to be Osamu Dazai, who had jumped into the water to kill himself. ("Was it you who interrupted my asphyxiation? I was endeavoring to shuffle off this mortal coil, and you had to involve yourself...")

Nonetheless, Dazai is grateful to Atsushi, so he buys him a nice dinner and introduces him to his coworkers in the Armed Detective Agency, a group of detectives who solve special cases ... using superpowers! Suicide-obsessed Osamu Dazai has the power to repress other powers; uptight straight man Doppo Kunikida can bring poems to life; Junichiro Tanizaki can create illusions; and in Volume 1 we don't get to see the powers of Kenji Miyazawa, Edogawa Ranpo, Akiko Yosano, and the rest. In a gloomy, early 20th-century Tokyo, this mismatched group of heroes fights rampaging tigers, superpowered mafia, and much more ...

If you're even slightly familiar with Japanese literature you've already got the in-joke: the characters of *Bungo Stray Dogs* are all named after



©2016 Kawakami Masaki

famous Japanese authors of the early 20th century! While the connections between character and namesake aren't much deeper than how the characters in *Hetalia* are named after European countries, it's a brilliant gimmick, giving an extra layer of fun to a manga that would otherwise be a basic, if competent, dark superhero action story. The character designs are attractive and androgynous, the art makes up in style what it lacks in backgrounds, and the dark/funny/emo mood fits weirdly well with the existentialist gloom many of these writers were known for. Later on, American authors like Margaret Mitchell and H.P. Lovecraft enter the plot as well (as antagonists, of course). I know I've discovered new music by reading *Jojo's Bizarre Adventure*, so maybe now I'll try reading some Junichiro Tanizaki.... **Recommended.**

(Jason Bradley Thompson)

### Kiniro Mosaic

"As the cherry blossoms bloomed, an English girl came to our house."

In middle school, Shinou Oomiya went overseas and became pen pals with Alice, the daughter of her foster family. ("Her name is Alice." "Alice? The Alice? From Wonderland?") We see flashbacks to Shinou's days in England, with Shinou and Alice attempting to communicate despite only being able to say "Hello" and "Kon-nichiwa," respectively. Then suddenly, Alice comes to Japan, and Shinou's friends Youko and



PUBLISHER  
Yen Press

STORY AND ART  
Yui Hara

RATING  
13+

Aya finally get to meet the "golden-haired angel"! Adorable and petite, all Alice has to do is use chopsticks or sit Japanese-style to fascinate everyone around her. Debates rage over whether Alice reminds them more of a bunny, a cat, or a hamster. While Alice entertains everyone with her Britishness, Shinou practices her English with less than successful results.

While on the surface it's just another four-panel manga about cute girls (and, of course, a ditzy teacher; gotta have a ditzy teacher), *Kiniro Mosaic* is more clever and creative than most. With its theme of foreignness, it almost comes off as a parody of weeabos obsessed with Japanese culture, such as the scenes when Shinou pretends to read English newspapers she actually can't read, or wants to die her hair blonde, or says she loves "European culture" but can't place Europe on a map. Later we meet Karen Kujou, a half-English girl, who embodies a different image of foreigners, talking in broken Japanese and saying things like "Japanese uniform very cute" and "Are you ninja? Walk up walls?" Despite the inevitable clichés like the weight jokes and the closeted lesbian girl, it's cute stuff, and the jokes generally hit home even

when they don't have anything to do with culture. Would it be interesting to interrogate the manga's wholesale, fetishistic equation of "blondeness" with "the West"? Well, sure, but you'd be missing a very funny manga. The Yen Press edition includes nine pages of translation notes.

**Recommended.** (Jason Bradley Thompson)



PUBLISHER  
Viz

STORY AND ART  
Yasuo Otagaki

ORIGINAL CONCEPT  
Hajime Yatate & Yoshiyuki Tomino

RATING  
16+

If one were to take the core essence of my life and use it as the basis for a sci-fi war story, *Gundam Thunderbolt* would be the result. Actually, what am I talking about? That IS what was done! How else could it be one of the best *Gundam* side stories ever written, hmm? Prior knowledge of *Gundam*'s "Universal Century" setting is not especially necessary to "get" this story as it's set in the backdrop of major series events and features a cast self-contained to this work. Nor is there any of that wacky psionic "Newtype" stuff that spuriously justifies nobody acting rationally like in the mainline *Gundam*; this is just a story about two sides engaged in a backwater skirmish of a much larger war.



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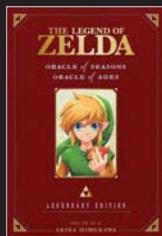
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## The Legend of Zelda: Oracle of Seasons & Oracle of Ages

If you've ever read a *Legend of Zelda* manga, chances are it was by Akira Himekawa. The duo, comprised of two anonymous female manga artists, has penned nearly every Japanese comic version of the hit video game series since *Ocarina of Time* in 1998, playing with different styles and interpretations as Nintendo has reinvented the hero Link and Princess Zelda over the years.



PUBLISHER  
Viz

STORY AND ART  
Akira Himekawa

RATING  
All Ages

In *Oracle of Seasons & Oracle of Ages*, recently rereleased in English in a beautiful paperback omnibus by Viz Media, Himekawa tackles a Zelda game that is really two different games. *Oracle of Seasons* and *Oracle of Ages*, released in 2001, follow the *Pokémon* formula of releasing two related games side by side, in this case transporting Link to two alternate worlds with two different gameplay mechanics: in the land of Holodrum, Link uses the Rod of Seasons to change between Spring, Summer, Fall, and Winter, while in the land of Labrytta, he uses the Harp of Ages to move between the past and present.

This is what makes the original games so unique, as the mechanics allow the player to experience a world with added dimensions of seasons and time. In manga form, this is hard to replicate, so Himekawa opts for a fairly straightforward heroic narrative, with mischievous village boy Link gathering

a motley crew of friends and heading off to save Din, the Oracle of Seasons, and then Nayru, the Oracle of Ages (Zelda remains safe in her castle for the entire manga, unlike her video game counterpart). The *Seasons* arc is the worse of the two, featuring irritating talking animals and a simplistic damsel in distress plot, but in *Ages*, Nayru gets possessed by an evil witch and takes control of a kingdom, forcing Link to work with local villagers to foment a rebellion. It's got a lot more meat than the *Seasons* arc, but even then, the *Zelda* games have never had the strongest plots, and the manga is so full of one-off references to characters from the game that it often becomes nearly impossible to follow.

The saving grace is Himekawa's exuberant art style, which brings this spry young version of Link to life with far more personality than his stone-faced video game brethren. Getting a video game adaptation right is hard business, especially when the subject is a series as beloved as *The Legend of Zelda*, but Himekawa manages to at least provide a swashbuckling adventure for kids in *Oracle of Ages & Oracle of Seasons*. Adult fans of the original games may find this one a bit dull. [Evan Minto]

## The Legend of Zelda: Twilight Princess

Some fans noted that *Breath of the Wild*, the latest installation in the *Legend of Zelda* franchise, seems to be the Most Anime *Zelda* game ever made, but it's hardly the first time *Zelda* has gone full anime. For fans of moody heroes who groan about their dark pasts, look no further than *Twilight Princess*, the latest adaptation from the masters of *Zelda* manga, the pair of female manga artists known by the pen name Akira Himekawa.

The 2006 *Twilight Princess* game is a bit dull thanks to an atmospheric but empty world, and Himekawa's manga adaptation adds a lot of much-needed personality to the otherwise sparse game. Link is a farmhand at Ordon Village, hiding a much less innocent past. He wants to live a peaceful life, but soon monsters from the Twilight Realm attack the village, launching him into his quest. The story is only roughly inspired by the original one, and like most of Himekawa's *Zelda* manga, takes considerable liberties with plot and characters.

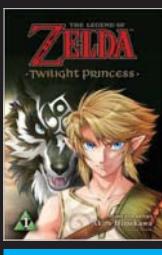
Unfortunately, that results in a Link that feels wildly out of place in a *Zelda* story. He's not a hero setting out on his first quest, but a former warrior seeking solace, not unlike Kenshin in *Rurouni Kenshin*. That would be fine if his whining about his past and solemnly warning about "the darkness" wasn't stretched across a full volume of introductory scenes before kicking off the primary conflict. Midna, the quirky sprite who serves as Link's companion and a rare splash of personality in the game, only appears at the end of the first volume!

Himekawa's art matches the tone, with detailed character designs and moody, high-contrast lighting. And unlike many of Himekawa's other adaptations, this is not a light-hearted kids' manga; it features a fair bit of bloody violence and some dark themes.

*Twilight Princess*, with its darker story and less expansive cast, has the potential to tell a much more interesting *Zelda* tale than some of Himekawa's other adaptations, but the first volume is just a little too melodramatic to take seriously. [Evan Minto]

The Earth Federation space colony Moore was destroyed by the forces of Zeon. Now all that remains is a massive field of debris floating in space, whose fragments are prone to exchanging electrical surges. The surviving "Moore Brotherhood" is out for revenge, few more so than Ensign Io Fleming, an arrogant and capable killer who blares freeform jazz from a pirate radio station over the comms to let the enemy know their time is up. The beauty of *Gundam* is when there are no clear-cut "good" or "evil" sides—just people—but how can I not root for the grown-up version of Manga Me? Namely, idol pop-loving Chief Petty Officer Daryl Lorenz of the Zeon's "Living Dead" division, a sniper unit comprised entirely of soldiers that have lost limbs who fight on using crude prosthetics. (Note: child Manga Me is Milton from *Peepo Choo*.)

Yasuo Ohtagaki is best known for the glorious mega-seinen manga *Moonlight Mile*, so it's no surprise that his *Gundam Thunderbolt* manga has a bit more nudity and strong language than the stellar anime adaptation that followed. He knocks it out of the park from the artwork, mecha designs, and plotting standpoints. They practically function as a storyboard for the anime, but since even the extended *December Sky* film version clocks in at a little over an hour, there's more to sink into within these pages. If you like one, then you'll like the other. The Viz release retains the color pages at the start of select chapters, while retouching the sound effects into English. Even though my life story is that of sitting in a chair being vexed over the *Gundam* and hating on jazz, I have zero complaints. *Gundam Thunderbolt* is visually spectacular, easily comprehensible, and short enough to not be intimidating to new fans. This makes it far superior to all that *Mobile Suit Crossbone Gundam* manga that maniacs continually demand be released in English and turned into anime! **Recommended.** (Daryl Surat)



PUBLISHER  
Viz

STORY AND ART  
Akira Himekawa

RATING  
13+



PUBLISHER  
Drawn & Quarterly

STORY AND ART  
Tadao Tsuge

RATING  
Unrated/18+

## Trash Market

*Drawn & Quarterly* is one of the few English-language publishers willing to take on underground and alternative manga, having published such titles as Susumu Katsumi's *Red Snow*, Imiri Sakabashira's *The Box Man*, and Yoshihiro Tatsumi's groundbreaking gekiga anthologies. The tradition continues with *Trash Market*, a strong collection of short stories by longtime alternative mangaka Tadao Tsuge. It's surprising that Tadao has scored an English-language anthology before his more famous brother Yoshihiro, best known for the surreal *Screw Style*, but it's a welcome new edition of classic alt-manga.

Tsuge drew the stories in *Trash Market* between the 1960s and 1990s, and though his



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storytelling skills develop over the years, his voice remains remarkably consistent. Many of the stories are autobiographical, drawing from a life spent struggling out of postwar poverty and into the starving-artist counterculture. In other stories, disaffected salarymen suffocate in convention. "Manhunt," one of the best, features a middle-aged man who is found by private detectives after inexplicably dropping out of society: "I was paralyzed, creeping up from my toenails. Gradually I felt my body begin to disappear..." The volume's standout may be the title story, inspired by Tsuge's stint working at a blood bank, which observes a group of homeless men as they hang out at a street market, swap insults and dirty stories, and sell plasma to survive.

Tsuge's simplistic underground art periodically breaks through to moments of visual poetry, especially in the more polished later stories. Themes repeat: the awkward intersection of art and politics, the long grind of poverty, revolution and discontent. (In one tongue-in-cheek story, Tsuge considers joining an anarchist plot to destroy Japan: "Hmm ... no manga deadlines, taxes are due soon ... Should I?") The beautifully curated hardcover includes a fascinating illustrated essay by Tsuge about his life and another essay by translator Ryan Holmberg, who does the material proud. **Recommended.** (Shaenon K. Garrity)

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PUBLISHER

Vertical

STORY AND ART

Ryo Hanada

RATING

Unrated/18+

**Devil's Line**  
Meek college student Tsukasa has never met a vampire (or devil, as they're also called) until gaunt, handsome Anzai saves her from a vampire attack. Anzai is a half-vampire, part of a special police division that tracks down violent vampires and brings them into custody—a necessity in this world where one in 10,000 people are part of the "red-eyed race," who look outwardly normal and may live normal lives for years until their bloodthirst is triggered by the adrenaline of sex or the sight of spilled blood. A strange relationship forms between them, and soon Anzai is back, creepin' around her balcony or coming inside to drink tea and warm his chilly body under her kotatsu. But although they can be friends, Anzai knows that giving in to his deeper urges could result in Tsukasa's death. ("I'm filthy. I carry this horrible devil inside me," he thinks.) Before long, Tsukasa follows Anzai into the strange vampire subculture and discovers that evil can reside in the human heart as well as the hearts of devils...

The idea that "vampirism as a metaphor for sex" is an oldie but goodie, and this vaguely shojo-esque paranormal romance manga

**"Whether someone turns into a monster or not depends entirely on them. That's true for both humans and devils."**

delivers the horror-passion of repressed lust while delicately handling deeper issues. Here, vampires pose as humans while using drugs and counseling to restrain their bloodlust, and the usual genre line between "good" supernaturals (the protagonists) and "bad" supernaturals (the villains) isn't at all clear; in one strong scene, Anzai tells a vampire woman that she might have spared the lives of the humans she loved if she had "come out" and told them about her vampirism earlier. And while the thrill of being embraced by a monster who wants to eat you is definitely central to the story, *Devil's Line* deals with issues of consent more openly and progressively than most vampire romances. The art—a sort of shojo/action hybrid—is sometimes grossly misproportioned but manages to have the occasional striking face or pose. Fans of *Tokyo Ghoul*, another manga with better writing than art, will want to dig in. (Jason Bradley Thompson)



## Black Ships: Illustrated Japanese History: The Americans Arrive

From 1633 to the middle of the 19th century, Japan had an official policy of isolation, admitting only a tiny trickle of foreign traders and forbidding Japanese nationals from leaving its shores. As Japan watched the British conquer neighboring China, the authorities' fears of foreign interference only grew stronger. Many attempts at diplomacy were rebuffed—Russia in 1804, Britain in 1808, France in 1838—until 1853, when three American naval vessels, the "black ships" of Commodore Perry, sailed to Japan determined to win favored trading status for the USA.

*Black Ships*, an introduction to this famous feat of "gunboat diplomacy," shows both the US and Japanese perspective on the event that would, by 1867, lead to the collapse of the Shogunate and the rise of "modern" Japan. Perry gambled on overconfidence, sailing right up to the capital city of Edo demanding to speak to the shogun, while intimidating the coastal cities with cannon tests and military drills. ("Perry had decided that in this land of strict ceremony and

hierarchy, the best policy was to remain aloof and appear to be an unquestionably important figure.") On the Japanese side, debates raged between those who wanted trade, communication, and access to Western technology, and hard-liners who wanted national defense. Meanwhile, individual Japanese and Westerners met in numerous smaller incidents, such as shipwrecked sailors, hampered by ignorance on both sides. ("As the clothes and ships of the various nationalities looked very similar to the Japanese, some felt it was actually one superpower threatening them, just pretending to come from different areas.")

With such fascinating subject matter, this book's biggest flaw is that there's simply too much to cover in a 100-page graphic novel: it comes off as condensed and staccato, with brief sequences of action and dialogue floating like chunks in a soup of exposition. Arguments for and against colonialism are summarized by debates between Commodore Perry, who believes in Western "Manifest Destiny" to conquer the world, and Captain Franklin Buchanan, representing a more anti-imperial policy. (Perry's short-lived idea of invading the Ryukyu Islands to "liberate" them from mainland Japan



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## THE GARDEN OF YURI

Yuri ("lily"), also known as Girl's Love Manga, are manga romances between female characters. Though stories about women, they're enjoyed by readers of all genders and orientations.



PUBLISHER  
Seven Seas  
STORY AND ART  
Hiromi Takashima  
RATING  
16+

Yamada planted. Yamada is thrilled and finds it endearing that an all-star like Kase is interested in plants or flowers when she's got so much else going on. The two start talking, and eventually Yamada finds that she just can't stop thinking about Kase. She wonders if she could be falling in love, even though the two of them are girls—that couldn't happen, she thinks.

But it can and it does happen, and despite playful warnings from a friend that Kase has an ex on the track and field team and there are other obstacles to her heart, a relationship grows between them. At first Yamada protests to herself that she only wants Kase to "like" her, but will a pure desire for friendship later blossom into romance? Eventually their feelings culminate in an unexpected manner that will have you smiling ear to ear when the volume comes to an end.

It's nothing especially new or inventive, but *Kase-san and Morning Glories* is an adorable, well-paced story about first love, coming to grips with who you love despite the stigma that might be attached to it, and what you'd do if the one you love might be injured or hurt. It's addictive to see the relationship come to

and track runner Kase as they slowly grow to realize they have feelings for each other.

It all begins when Yamada is tending to her garden duties and notices popular and attractive Kase-san checking out the morning glories



©2015 Hiromi Takashima

fruition. Delicate, sweet artwork and addictive pacing make this a manga worth reading. (Brittany Vincent)

## Kindred Spirits on the Roof

"It's so fluffy!" *Kindred Spirits on the Roof* is basically made of sparkles and kittens and is about as adorable as a manga can get. Throw out any notions of tragic gays, this sweet lesbian romance ends happily ever after for everyone.



PUBLISHER  
Seven Seas  
STORY AND ART  
Hachi Ito & Aya Furuno  
RATING  
13+

The book is split into two storylines that both take place at the all girl's school Girl's Academy of Commerce. The first follows Shiori and Mako. In middle school Mako confessed her love for Shiori, her childhood best friend. Overwhelmed and unsure, Shiori literally ran away. Since then the two friends, now high school students, haven't spoken to each other. But when Shiori gets involved painting scenery for the class play she

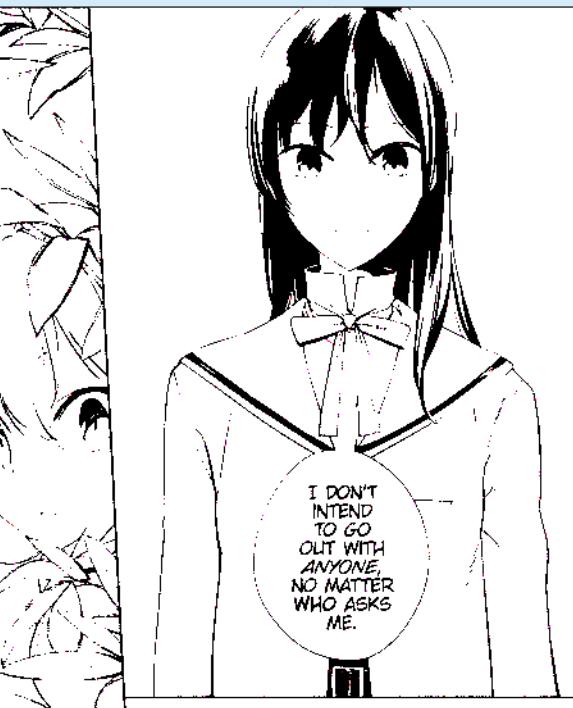


©2015 Nakatani Nio

starts to come out of her shell. She befriends Hina-chan and Maki-chan, who figure out Shiori's secret and help her patch her relationship with Mako. Hina and Maki's own romances with other girls also encourage Shiori to follow her heart when she worries that it's strange she could be in love with Mako.

The second half of the book is the tale of two girls who share the hobby of "watching friendly girls." Hase Chiharu joins the Quiz Club when she sees adorable upperclassmen being adorable with each other. She meets Tokino, a fellow lover of romance, and together they stalk Natsuki and Rika, the Quiz Club captains.

Familiarity with the source material, a dating sim/visual novel called *Kindred Spirits on the Roof*, isn't necessary to enjoy this book. The stories stand alone, though the unfamiliar will be wondering what is up with the ghosts who make a cameo toward the end of the first story arc. The art is adorable too, but despite some differences in hair and eye shape, the girls come close to all looking alike. It doesn't help that everyone is wearing the same school uniform all the time either. On the upside, the art gives a solid sense of place, with lots of backgrounds



©2015 Hachi Ito, ©2015 Aya Fumio

that don't look as flat as in many school manga. Every page is pleasant to look at and the action flows nicely from panel to panel. It's a well-paced, happy light read with minimal pathos. (Che Gilson)



PUBLISHER  
Seven Seas

STORY AND ART  
Nakatani Nio

RATING  
13+

### Bloom Into You

*Bloom Into You* is a slow-burning romance that flips the "love at first sight" trope. High school student Yuu has never had a big romance. She wants to meet a special someone but so far no fireworks have gone off. She listens to love songs like any teen girl but can't fully identify with them. Even when a boy confesses his love for her at the end of middle school, Yuu just leaves him hanging while she thinks about her feelings.

In a lesser book all that would change when she meets Nanami. But *Bloom* is a better book than that. Yuu sees Nanami turn down a boy, telling him she doesn't intend to date anyone, and she immediately thinks Nanami is cool. At last Yuu has found someone just like her, someone who hasn't been bowled over with a massive first crush or romance. But just as Yuu gets to know Nanami a roadblock comes up: Nanami confesses her love for Yuu! It's Nanami's first big love but Yuu isn't really sold on the idea. Still, Yuu sticks around because she likes Nanami (just not romantically). Gradually, as they get closer Yuu begins to wonder if they could be more than friends.

It's not the heart-pounding, shojo-sparkling love that all the songs proclaim true love to be ... but that's exactly the point, and it's a good point. That sort of "love at first sight" idea is pushed hard by movies, TV, and film, but as one of Yuu's friends says in the book, "Sometimes love just takes time for the other person to get into, right?" Another nice twist is that Yuu is actually the cooler of the pair. Nanami is the one spouting borderline cheesy lines that sound like something a boy in shojo manga would say. And even when Nanami steals Yuu's first kiss, Yuu isn't all that concerned or flustered; she considers her feelings with the level head and keen observation so often lacking in romance books.

Presumably later volumes will develop the romance more as Yuu's feelings catch up to Nanami's. It's the slow pace and thoughtful sensibility that make this book so good. Nio's art is beautiful and beautifully paced. Care and attention are given to drawing out little moments and the characters have plenty of space for emotional reaction shots. Nothing ever feels or looks rushed. **Recommended.** (Che Gilson)

eerily foreshadows 20th-century US foreign policy.) Akiko Shimojima's art is adequate to the task, but not exceptional, lacking in detail and with a few awkward moments, such as when Perry's ships loom out of the fog before Japanese fishermen with a "KEH KEH KEH" sound effect that might be intended as wood creaking but sounds more like a *Yu-Gi-Oh!* villain's laughter. It's impossible to draw a line as to when something truly "ends" in history, so the book's abrupt ending is forgivable, but you could write a graphic novel twice this long about this time period. (Jason Bradley Thompson)



PUBLISHER  
Yen Press

STORY AND ART  
Tsuyoshi Watanabe

RATING  
18+

### Dragons Rioting

As a child, Rintaro was diagnosed with a rare and implausible medical condition, "Hentai Syndrome," which means becoming sexually aroused can kill him. ("When all his blood rushes to his groin, it will put a sudden and momentous strain on his heart.") After years of training in martial arts and self-discipline, he enrolls in what he thinks is an all-boys' high

school, a sanctuary from the dangers of female flesh. Wouldn't you know it, it turns out to be a girls' school that recently went co-ed, and the student body is made up almost entirely of hot girls with massive breasts spilling out of their unbuttoned uniforms. They're also locked in a nonstop martial arts war for school supremacy, and Rintaro's defensive skills, developed to dodge boobs, stand to turn the tide.

By now you probably can guess whether *Dragons Rioting* is in your wheelhouse. As convoluted as the setup is, it's little more than a delivery device for T&A close-ups and drawings of busty girls with their clothes ripping away. The fan service, starting with a little boy gawking at breasts covered in a substance readers will be either relieved or disappointed to realize is ice cream, is extreme (and tasteless) enough to earn the book its Mature rating despite no actual sex or nudity.

To the manga's credit, every element is pushed just as outlandishly over the top. Rintaro's musclebound martial-artist dad looks like he stepped out of an old *Street Fighter* game, the average female character has breasts at least the size of her head, and schoolyard brawls explode pavement and topple buildings. Rintaro, who's even more impossibly super-strong than the three sexy "dragons" who run the school, has to use all his power to dodge the usual fate of the shonen manga protagonist: falling into cleavage. It's a big, dumb, fun manga and for all but the thirstiest readers the humor will eventually wear thin, but at least it knows it's big, dumb fun. (Shaenon K. Garrity)

*Bungo Stray Dogs* offers  
superhuman conflicts at  
their biggest and boldest.

# THE **PAGEMASTERS**

By Paul Thomas Chapman





**S**omething is rotten in the city of Yokohama. Factions of super-powered individuals secretly vie for control of the city, with sporadic outbreaks of gang violence sometimes escalating into open warfare in the streets. A young man named Atsushi Nakajima is tossed headlong into this shadow-war when he turns 18 years old and the orphanage he was raised in kicks him out, telling poor Atsushi to fend for himself or die face down in the gutter. Worse still, Atsushi is the target of a mysterious monster: a huge, ferocious white tiger stalks Atsushi wherever he goes, leaving chaos and destruction in its wake.

Atsushi's abysmal luck improves when he encounters an odd man attempting to drown himself in the river. This strangely suicidal guardian angel is Osamu Dazai, a member of the Armed Detective Agency, one of the two superhuman factions battling for control of Yokohama. Dazai takes Atsushi under his wing and demonstrates that Atsushi's true problems aren't with the world outside, but rather with the beast within. Although he doesn't realize it at first, Atsushi is a weretiger, a shape-shifting being of immense supernatural power. For reasons unknown, the Port Mafia—the super-powered criminal syndicate that rules Yokohama's underworld with an iron fist—has put an enormous bounty on Atsushi's head. With the aid of the Armed Detective Agency, will Atsushi be able to survive and unravel the mysteries of his seemingly cursed existence?

This is the premise of *Bungo Stray Dogs*, a 2016 action/supernatural TV anime with direction by Takuya Igarashi and animation by BONES. The series is based on the manga and light novels written by Kafka Asagiri and illustrated by Sango Harukawa. Since the "bungo" in the title means "literary master," there's an additional caveat: all of the super-powered heroes and villains in *Bungo Stray Dogs* and all of their reality-bending powers are based on real-life authors and their works. Dazai, for example, gets his suicidal tendencies from his real-life namesake, a Japanese

novelist of the Modern period who took his own life in 1948. In the fantasy world of *Bungo Stray Dogs*, Osamu Dazai is a private detective who fights crime with the help of a talent called "No Longer Human," which allows him to neutralize the superhuman abilities of anyone that he touches. The Port Mafia is similarly stacked with literary heavyweights, especially the ruthless Ryunosuke Akutagawa, a black-hearted villain who takes an immediate hatred to Atsushi and whose talent, "Rashomon," allows Akutagawa to tear the very fabric of space apart.

*Bungo Stray Dogs* is at its best when the superhuman conflicts are at their biggest and boldest. BONES excels at animating high-concept action sequences, so the clashes between the Port Mafia, the Armed Detective Agency, and the Guild are where the show really shines. If other seinen action comics (such as *JoJo's Bizarre Adventure*) have taught us anything, it's that super human abilities are most captivating when they come with an unusual drawback or when the abilities are applied in a creative manner. This design philosophy is *Bungo Stray Dog's* raison d'être, as every superhuman agent's abili-

ties are clearly delineated. For example, Akiko Yosano of the Armed Detective Agency has an ability called "Thou Shalt Not Die," which can miraculously cure any ailment, but only if the patient is on death's door. Kenji Miyazawa's "Undefeated by the Rain" grants him superhuman strength, but the power only manifests when he's hungry. The most interesting power is probably Edogawa Rampo's "Super Deduction" ability, which isn't a superhuman talent at all, but rather just Rampo's hyper-developed skills of observation and deductive reasoning masquerading as a power.

*Bungo Stray Dogs* has slick character designs, a cool concept, great action scenes, and a surprisingly keen sense of humor, which is an unexpected perk from a series with such an exaggerated premise. If the series has an obvious flaw, it's a matter of pacing. *Bungo Stray Dogs* feels like a show that's constantly waiting to inhale. When the series has something important to say, its voice is bold and clear, but over



## STRAY MANGA

The original *Bungo Stray Dogs* manga is serialized in Kadokawa Shoten's *Young Ace* seinen manga magazine, a publication aimed at older men that has also published works such as *Erased* by Kei Sanbe and *Blood Lad* by Yuuki Kodama. Yen Press also publishes an English language version of *Bungo Stray Dogs*, so readers who want to experience the continued adventures of stray-kitty pretty boy Atsushi Nakajima and the misfits of the Armed Detective Agency can do so in both print and digital formats. So far, three volumes of the English release of the *Bungo Stray Dogs* manga are available. Kadokawa Shoten also releases a *Bungo Stray Dogs* series of light novels written by Kafka Asagiri and illustrated by Sango Harukawa. Unfortunately, at the time of this writing there are no official plans in place for an English language translation of these books, so fans of literary action heroes will need to wait to catch that tiger by the tail.



the course of two seasons and 24 episodes there are plenty of breathless moments. The best story arc by far is the three-episode flashback that opens the second season and examines Dazai's past as a merciless, high-level enforcer in the Port Mafia. As a result, *Bungo Stray Dogs* peaks in the middle and never quite regains its momentum leading into the climax.

Similarly, although it's a clever comparison, far too much screen time is dedicated to the visual and thematic parallels between the heroic Atsushi Nakajima and the sinister Ryunosuke Akutagawa. Atsushi lacks a sense of self-worth from a lifetime of physical and emotional abuse at the hands of his caretakers, while Akutagawa's self-loathing drives him to extravagant violence in a mad quest for the admiration of his peers. Atsushi's journey to becoming a hero takes far too long, and because he is so passive and reactionary, Atsushi's story is not as engaging as those of more proactive characters. Even Francis F, the leader of the Guild and the primary antagonist of the second season, has a more com-



pelling backstory than the protagonist of *Bungo Stray Dogs*, but this is because they establish Francis's true motivations without a single wasted line or superfluous scene.

A split-court series that was broadcast on Tokyo MX in April and October of 2016, *Bungo Stray Dogs* is also available via streaming on Crunchyroll (subtitled) and Funimation (dubbed). It's a solid effort. Although the writers for the series don't resolve all of the mysteries they introduce, the TV anime still concludes on a high note that leaves the audience wanting more. I'd love to see what *Bungo Stray Dogs* can do with the evil version of Fyodor Dostoyevsky that they tease during the denouement. Perhaps my wish will be granted in the near future. With the manga still ongoing and an original animation DVD planned for August 2017, who knows what further chapters lie ahead for these titans of fiction turned champions of justice?

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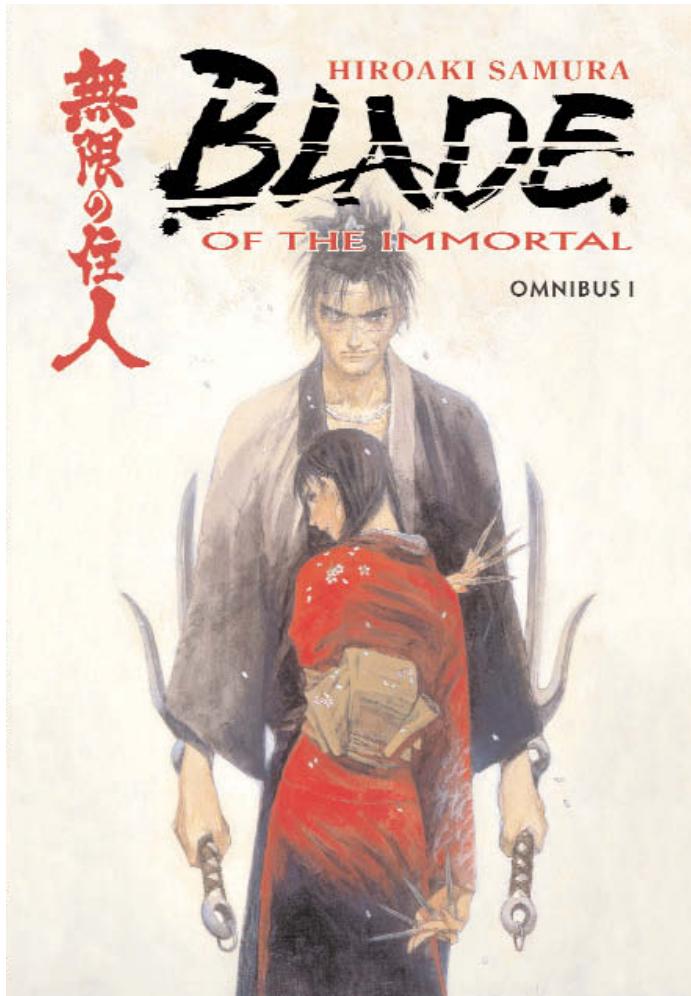
*Bungo Stray Dogs* is available from Crunchyroll and Funimation.

## BUNGO STRAY DOGS HAS SLICK CHARACTER DESIGNS, A COOL CONCEPT, GREAT ACTION SCENES, AND A SURPRISINGLY KEEN SENSE OF HUMOR.





# FREE MANGA PREVIEW



## BLADE OF THE IMMORTAL, OMNIBUS I

Story and Art by Hiroaki Samura

A cursed, seemingly immortal warrior aids a young girl in her quest for revenge, as the students of a brutal new sword school tear a bloody path across Japan. Hiroaki Samura's storytelling tour-de-force has won Japan's Media Arts Award, several British Eagle Awards, and an Eisner Award, among other international accolades. Intense and audacious, *Blade of the Immortal* takes period samurai action and deftly combines it with a modernist street idiom to create a style and mood like no other work of graphic fiction. Now being collected in a beautiful omnibus volume by Dark Horse Manga!

**Available now!**

**Note: this manga reads left to right!**

American comic book fans were among the first people to embrace manga, which began to be published in English on a regular basis in the 1980s and 1990s, and early manga were often published Western-style (left-to-right). *Blade of the Immortal*, which was first published in English in 1999, was one of these early manga, and the new omnibus edition of *Blade* therefore collects that Western-reading edition.

Yet by observing such things as the frequent right-handed gestures in the artwork, today's manga fan will realize the manga was not simply "flopped" (i.e. mirror-imaged so the art flows left to right). Instead, retouch artists Wayne Truman and Tomoko Saito, working with the approval of creator Hiroaki Samura, took a hybrid approach where Samura's original story panels were rearranged so that the story now reads in Western order, but the artwork itself, wherever possible, remains unflopped.

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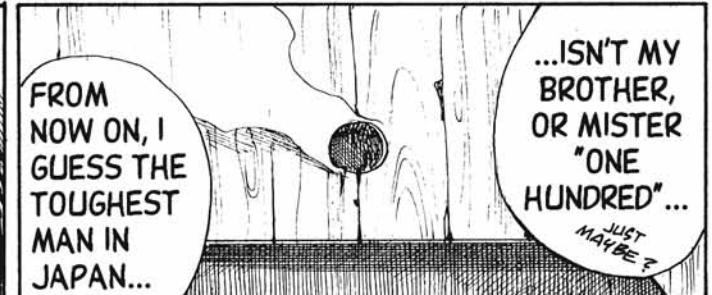
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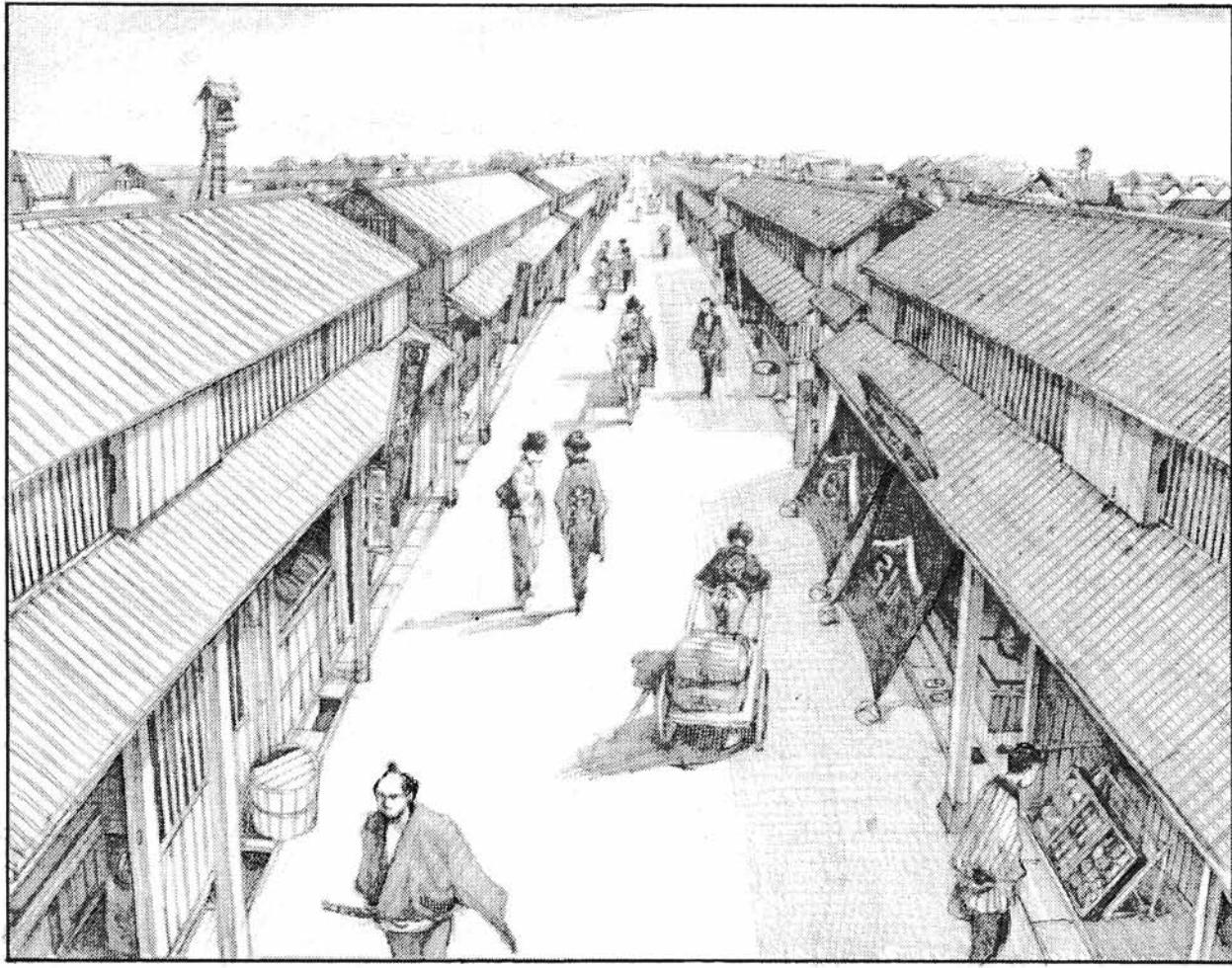
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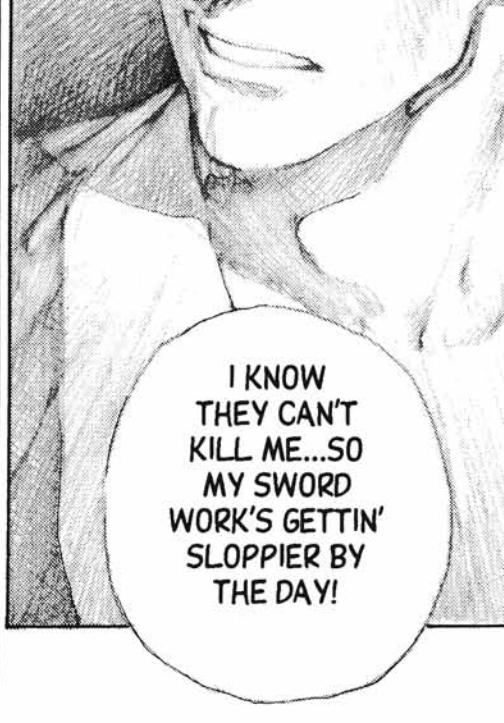
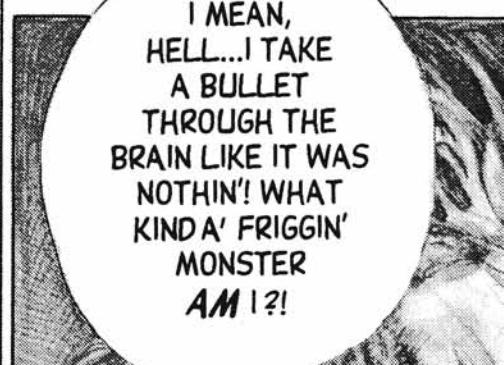
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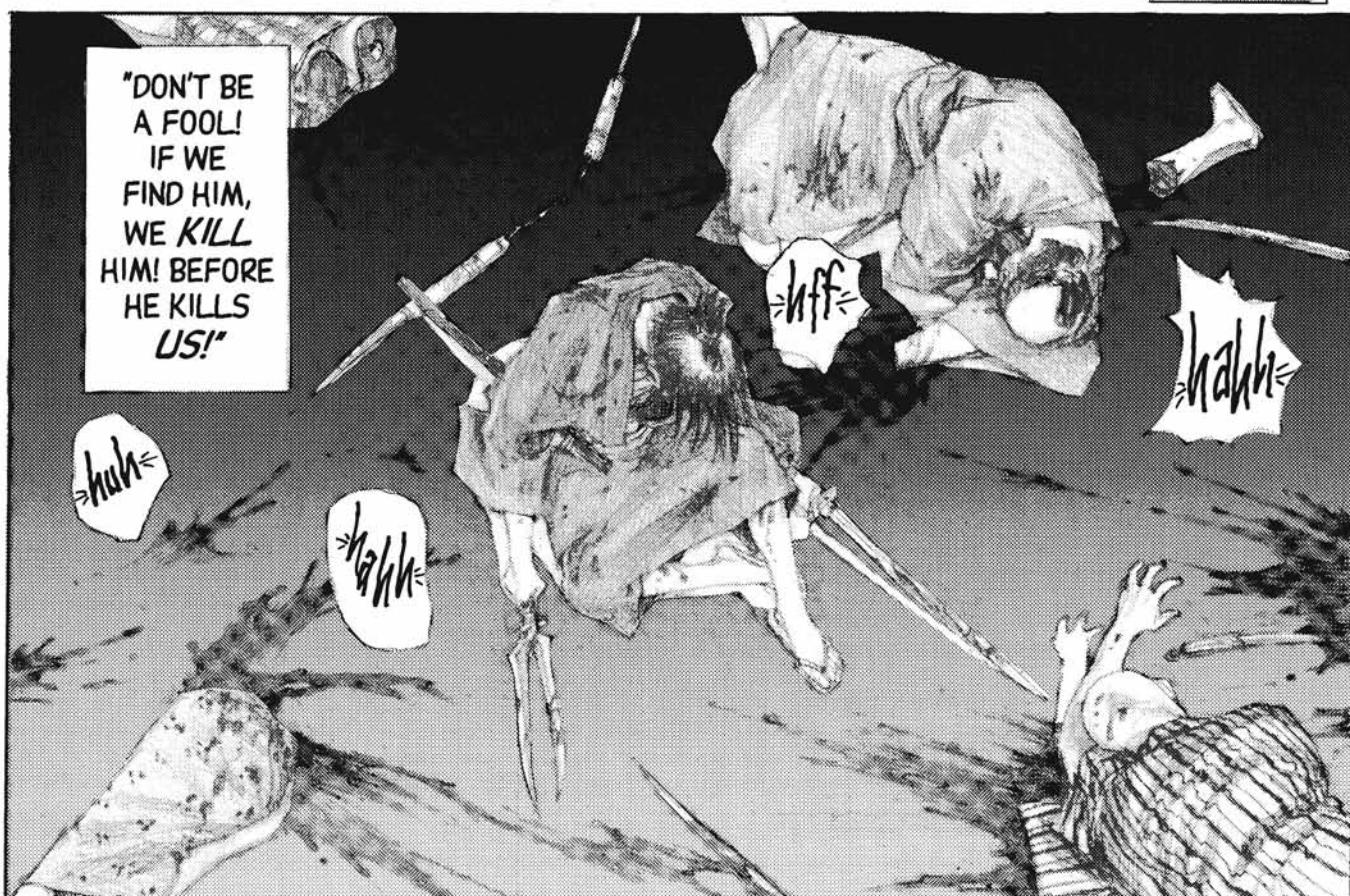
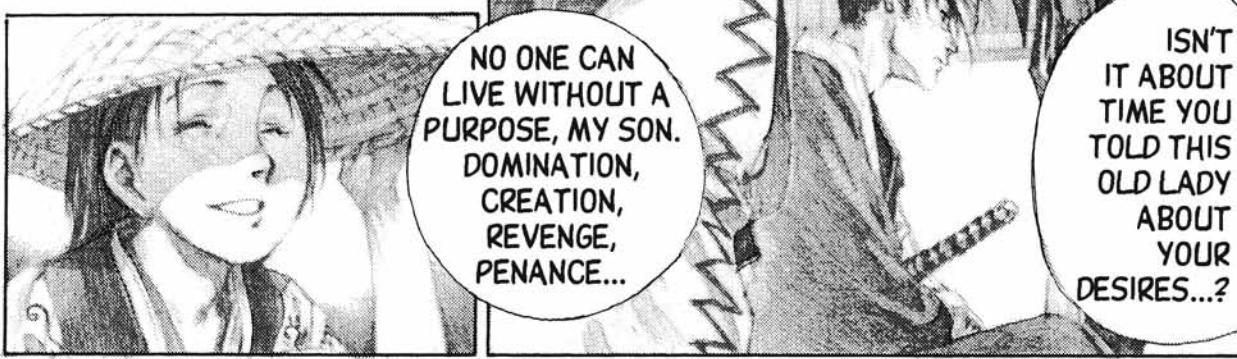
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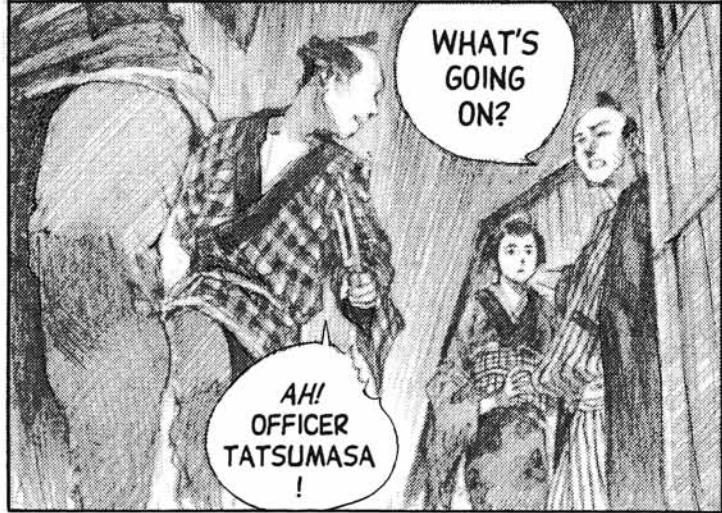
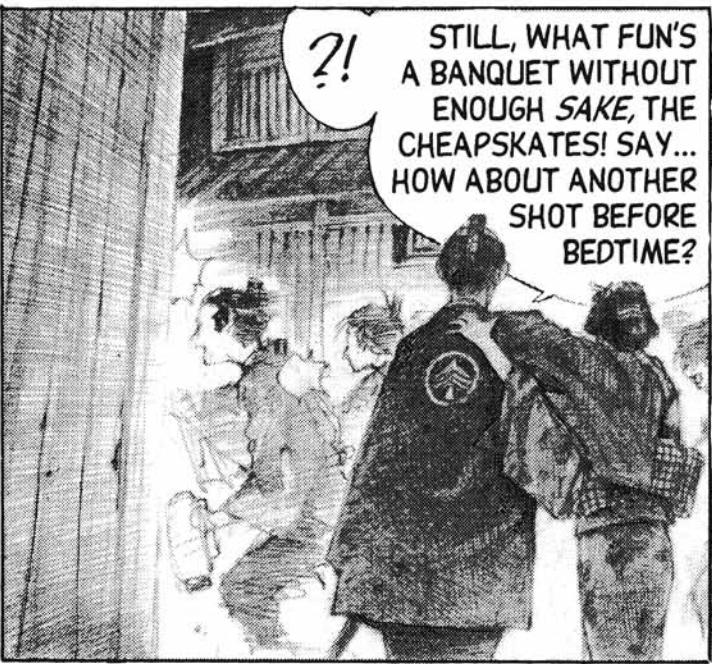
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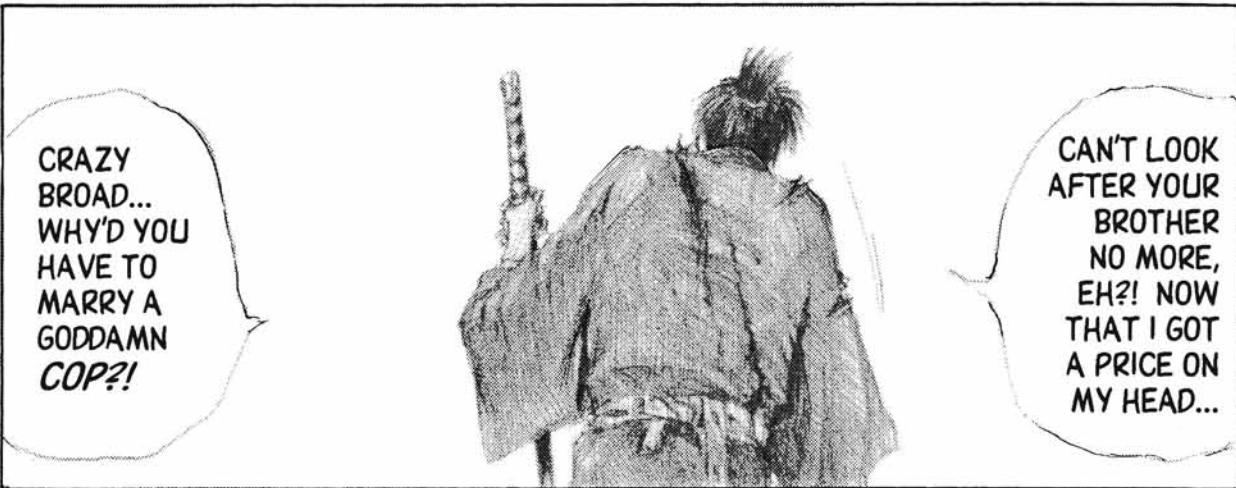
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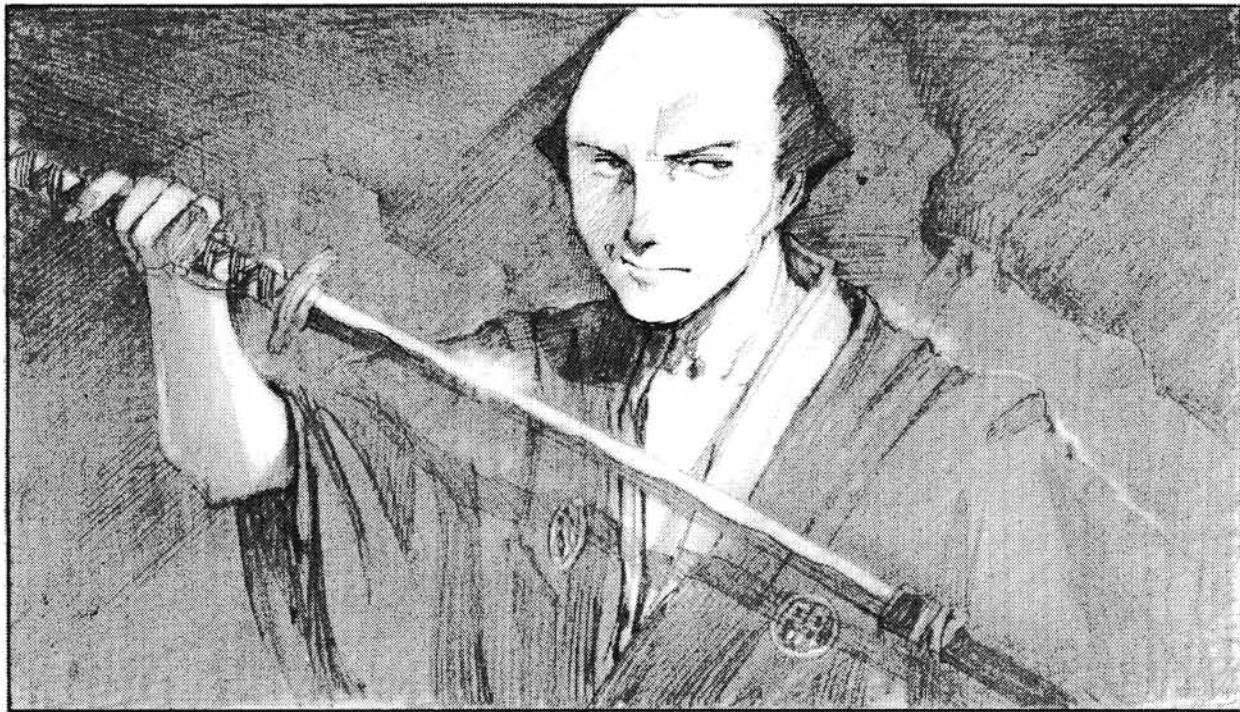
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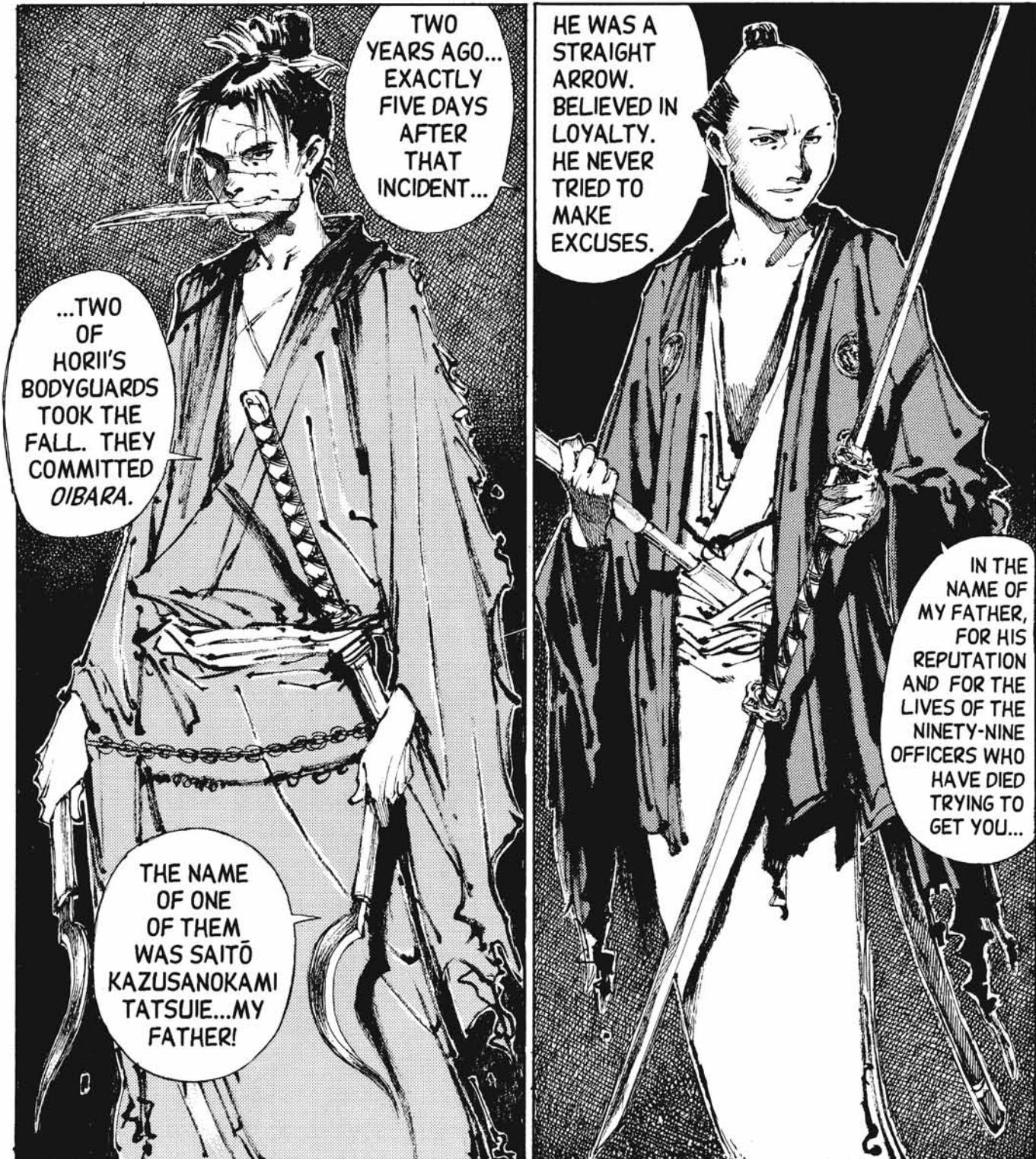
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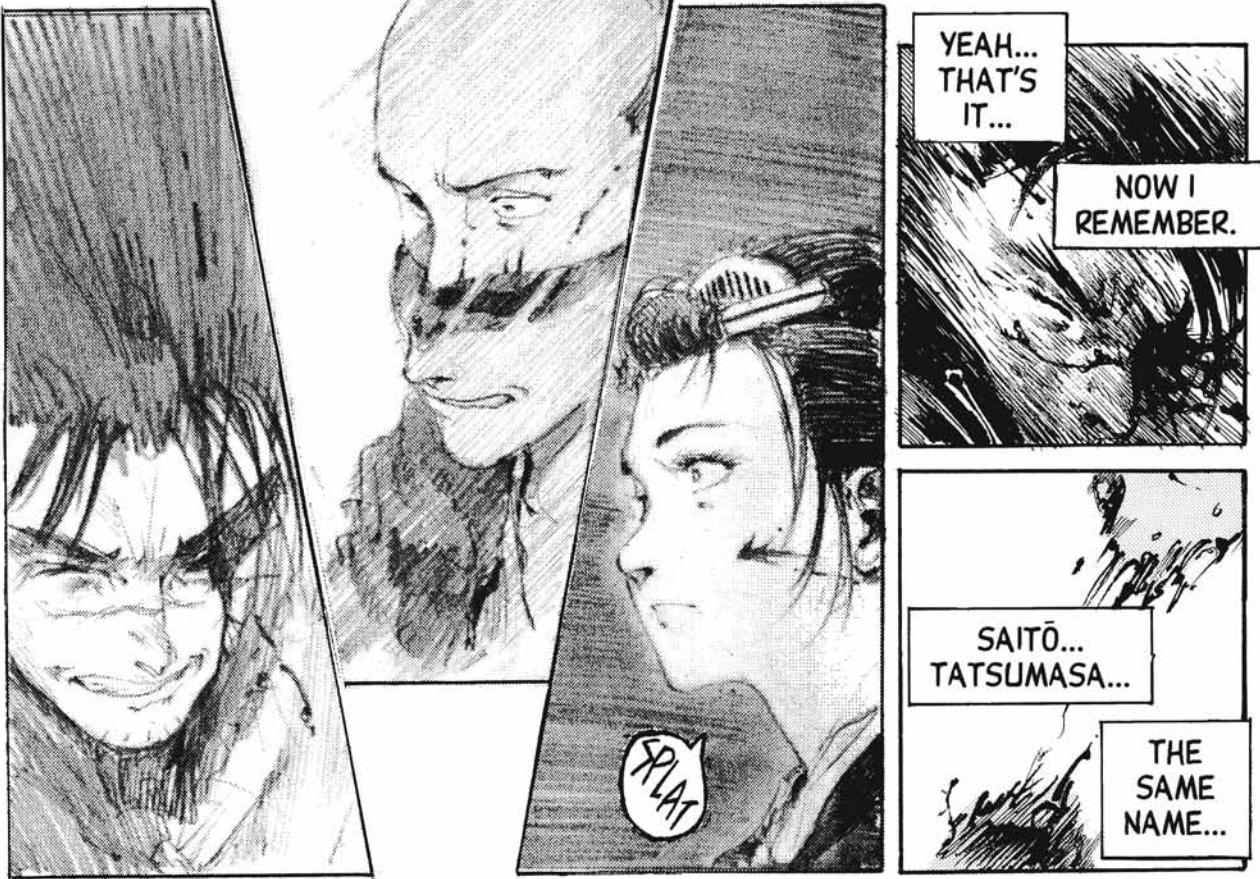
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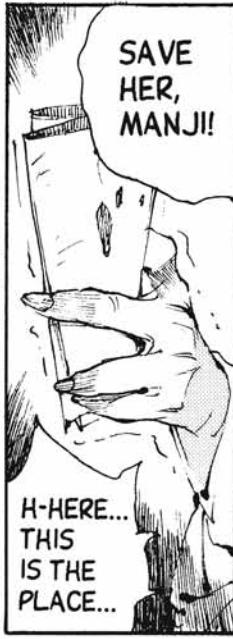
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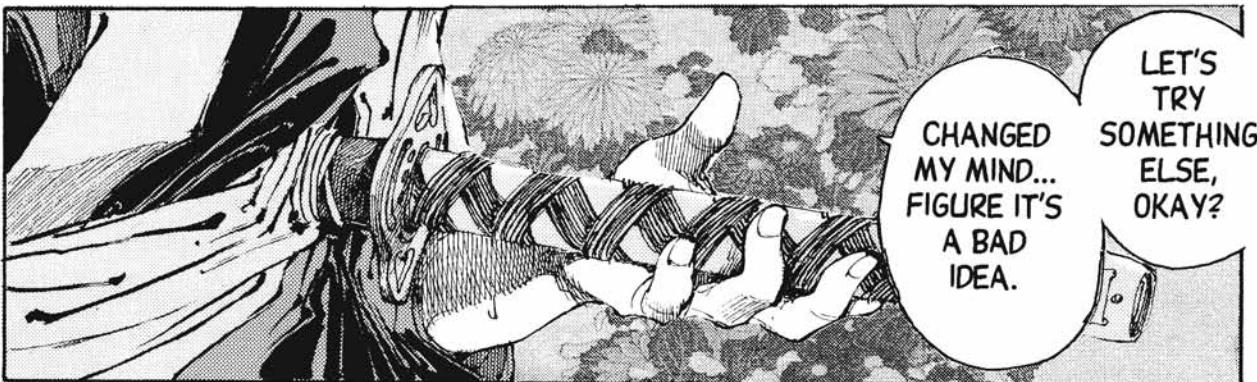
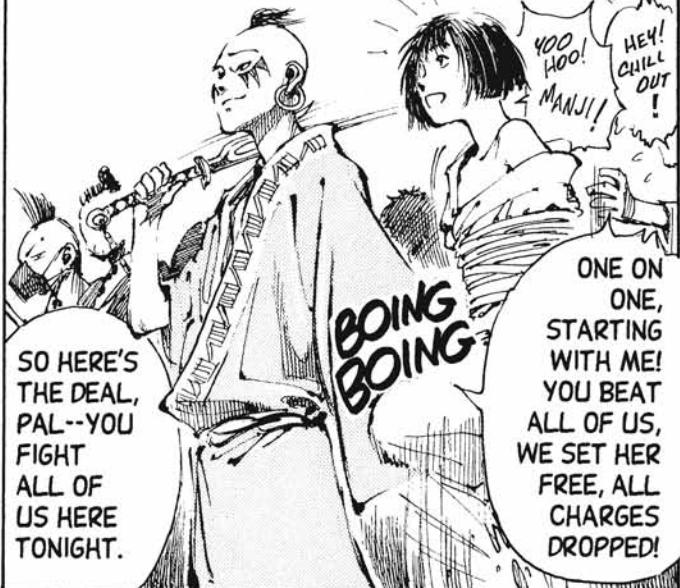
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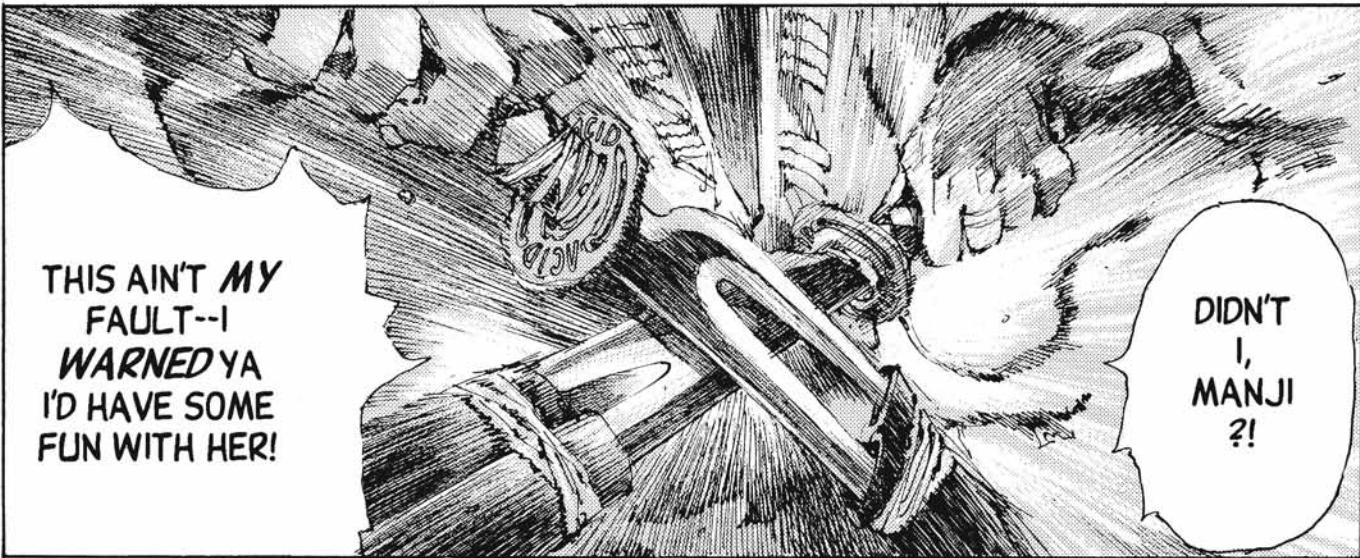
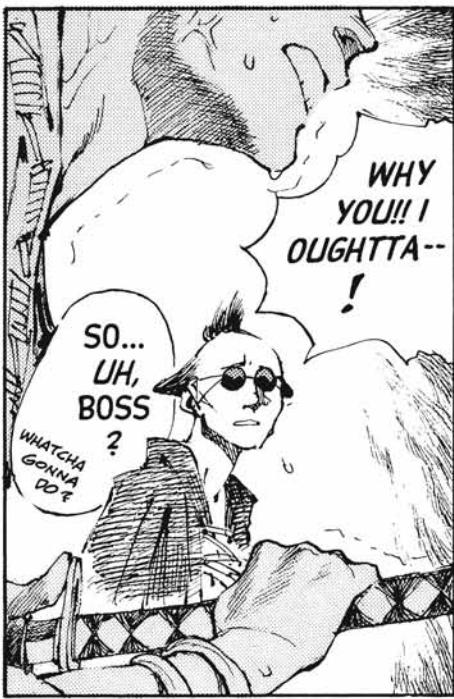
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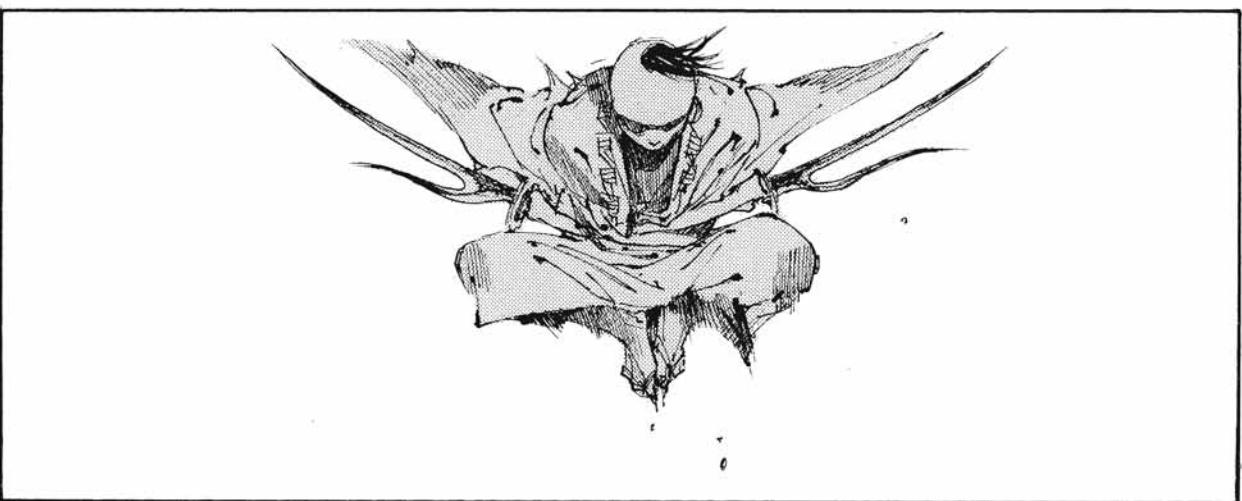
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**Rules, Rules, Rules.** The official rules are on page 92.

## Section 23

### Takao BUSOU SHINKI BLU-RAY (3 winners)

Some guys wait their entire lives to meet the girl of their dreams, but Rihito is already living with three of them! How did a high school freshman get so lucky? Well, the truth is that Anne, Aines, and Lene aren't normal girls: they're Shinki - 6-inch-high, customizable androids that are the latest hit in the toy world. Don't let their tiny size or doll-like appearance fool you; these little ladies have more than full-size intelligence and emotions, and, since each one would secretly prefer to be Rihito's favorite, there's always a little mechanical friction going on. Then, what happens when a fourth Shinki, Hina, is suddenly added to the mix? Get ready for sparks to fly as four battery-powered princesses take charge of Rihito's world in BUSOU SHINKI!



### FATE / KALEID LINER PRISMA ILLYA 2WEI HERZ! BLU-RAY (3 winners)

Illyasviel von Einzbern's life has become ridiculously complicated since the Kaleidostick Ruby convinced her to become a magical girl and join the quest for collecting the seven Class Cards. Since then, almost every day has brought a new surprise, from gaining new friends and partners like Miyu Edelfelt, to encountering her own magical twin! One would think Illya deserves a little time off, right? No such luck: a trip to the beach quickly turns into a magical quest, and Illya finds herself caught in a string of magical feuds, encounters with love potions, an excursion into the world of "boys love" comics (plus the women who read them), and half a dozen other delirious diversions. However, that's only the warm-up for what might be her final mission: recovering the long-lost Eighth Card! It's a mystical whirlwind of unexpected escapades and surprising new revelations as Illya's saga continues in FATE/KALEID LINER PRISMA ILLYA 2WEI! HERZ!

### Sakura of America

#### KOI COLORING BRUSH PEN (4 winners)

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Disgusted by the incompetence of Earth's military, the independent arms manufacturer Nergal builds its own space battleship and plans to launch a desperate offensive to save humanity. But due to a shortage of trained soldiers, they've assembled the most unorthodox crew to ever launch into orbit! With a pacifist cook-turned-unwilling mecha pilot and a ditzy admiral's daughter in command, can this unprecedented gathering of geeks, misfits and anime fans prevail against the Jovian menace?

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It is the Universal Century, year 153. The Zanscare Empire, which rules almost all of Side 2, has declared its independence from the old government, the hollow and corrupt Earth Federation. Under the justification of creating a new, space-based order, it has begun an invasion of Earth; and Point Kasarelia, the illegal residence area in Eastern Europe where Üso Ewin and Shahkti Kareen live, is no exception. As they are caught in the fighting between Zanscare and the opposing resistance organization, the League Militaire, fate draws Üso and his friends into the midst of battle.

Üso wants with all his heart to protect those around him, so he becomes the pilot of the Victory Gundam. He's about to experience firsthand the absurd reality known as war...

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**HOST IN THE SHELL  
HAS LONG BOASTED SOME  
OF ANIME'S GREATEST  
CYBERPUNK STORIES.**

# MACHINE DREAMS

BY EVAN MINTO

As I'm writing this, we are mere months away from the premiere of the live-action Hollywood adaptation of *Ghost in the Shell*. But before we get to the, ahem, Johansson-ization of *Ghost in the Shell*, let's take a look at the anime and manga that predate and inform the live-action version.

Masamune Shirow's manga started in 1989 in *Young Magazine*, known for publishing Katsuhiro Otomo's challenging sci-fi works *Domu* and *Akira*. In it, Shirow presents a future world of cyborgs and cyber-brains in which human experience has been wholly digitized, resulting in a slew of new "cyber-crimes." The tough, hotheaded Major Motoko Kusanagi commands an elite unit tasked with stopping them. Shirow's original work falls victim to pedantic interludes explaining technical minutiae of his ambitious future world, but it also asks tough questions about the influence of technology and rampant capitalism on the lives of human beings.



## HOST IN THE SHELL: ARISE

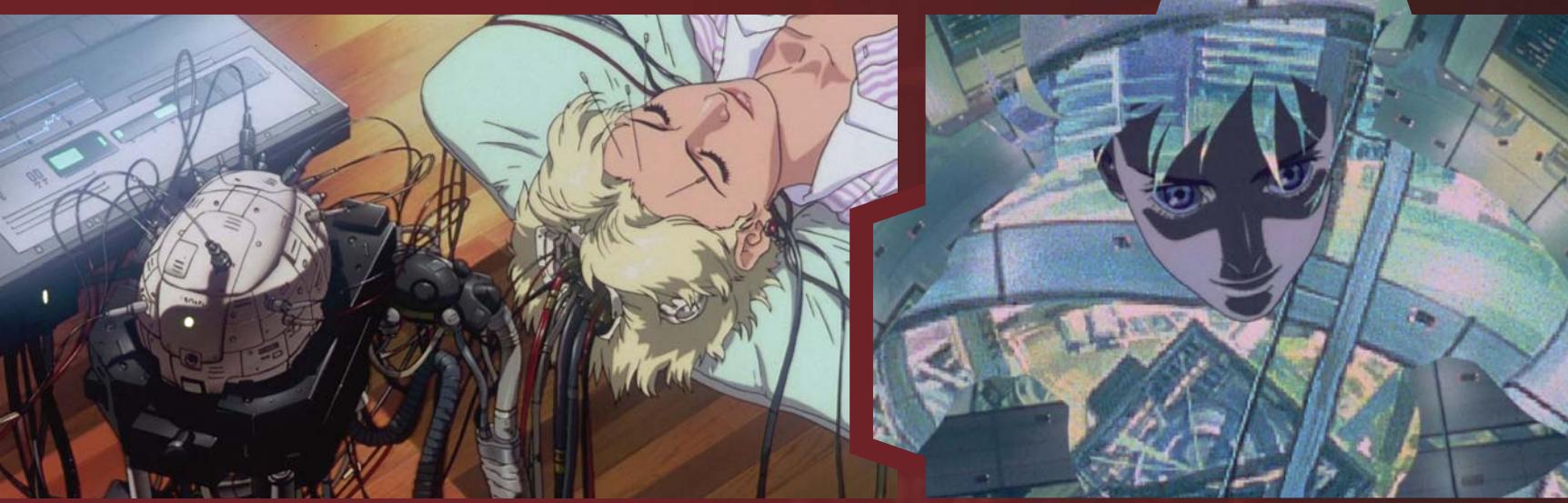
For a series so focused on building an internally consistent cyberpunk world, *Ghost in the Shell* has had a hard time maintaining a consistent chronology. Seemingly a prequel to the *Stand-Alone Complex* TV series, *Ghost in the Shell: Arise* (2013) is actually a whole NEW timeline. And in this one, Motoko wears a sick red jumpsuit and rides a cool motorcycle.

Motoko is an ex-soldier working as a contractor for Section 9, trying to stop a virus called "Fire-Starter" that has been planting false memories in cyber-brains. In four OVAs, two TV episodes, and a movie (confusingly titled *The New Movie*) the Major pieces together the full Section 9 team and puts them to work on the Fire-Starter

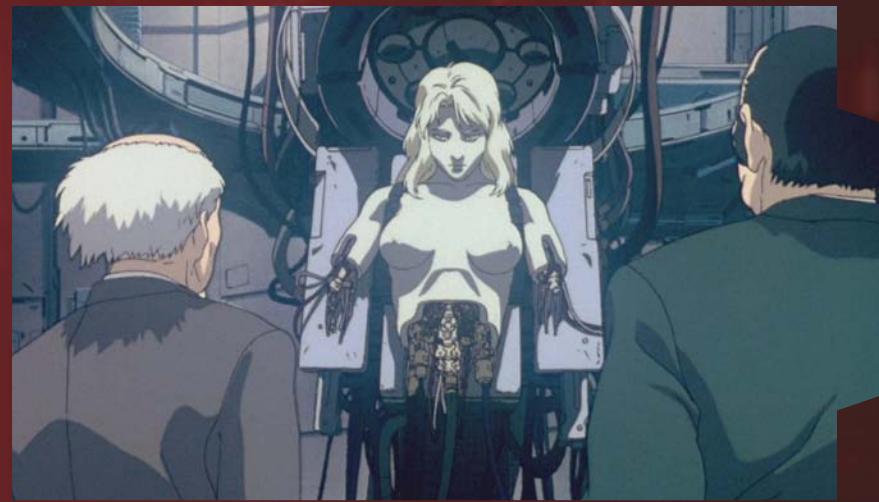
investigation. Unfortunately, the script groans under the weight of overcomplicated conspiracies with a few too many moving parts. Director Kazuchika Kise, however, is a veteran animator on the *Ghost in the Shell* franchise, and he not only composes stylish, snappy action sequences, but portrays a younger, more brash Motoko who is nevertheless the no-nonsense commander we know and love.

- Evan Minto





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## ENTER OSHII

Six years after the manga began, these questions would be reopened in a very different vision of *Ghost in the Shell*, from a very different creator. Director Mamoru Oshii took Shirow's original, a pulpy police procedural, and refocused it, using powerful imagery of bloated cityscapes and cybernetic bodies to explore the meaning of identity and memory.

In the film, Motoko and her squadmates at Public Security Section 9 (a subset of the full

squad from the manga) attempt to track down and put a stop to The Puppetmaster, a mysterious entity wanted for "ghost-hacking": taking over people's cyber-brains and using them to unknowingly commit crimes. As Motoko—far more mature and enigmatic than her manga counterpart—learns more about The Puppetmaster's origins, she begins to question her own fully cybernetic body, and how much her appearance and even her memories really contribute to her identity. It's a movie defined largely by its negative space; shots with little to no movement or dialogue fill time between the detective work, making the whole thing feel eerily sterile and mechanical. When Oshii punctuates this with a

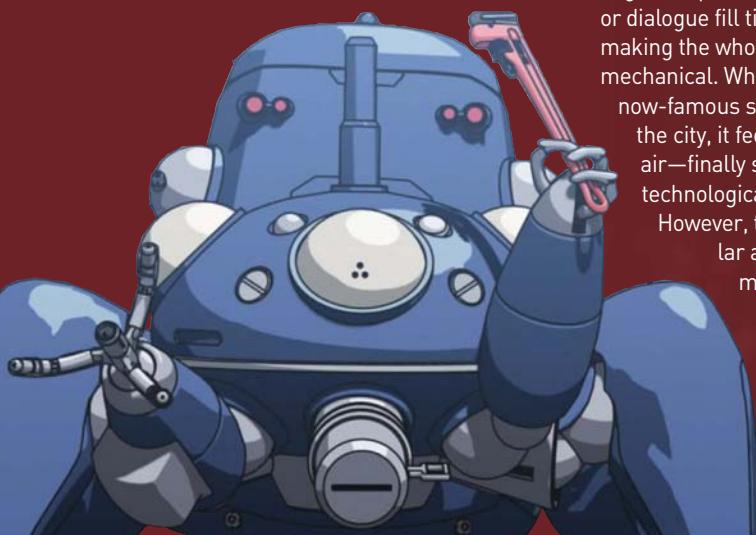
now-famous scene of a rainstorm rolling in on the city, it feels like a blessed breath of fresh air—finally something that's not under the technological thumb of humankind.

However, the film also features spectacular action sequences, including a climactic battle with a spider-tank (reportedly inspired in part by a real spider captured in a glass by animator Mitsuo Iso), but even when Oshii is indulging in

less cerebral pursuits, his penchant for philosophy shines through; in one shot, the tank fires a barrage of bullets up a wall with an etching of the Tree of Life, stopping inches from the space marked "hominis": human.

## FINDING INNOCENCE

Oshii returned to the franchise almost a decade later, after the success of the 2002 TV series *Ghost in the Shell: Stand-Alone Complex* (see sidebar). *Ghost in the Shell 2: Innocence* (2004), intended as a stand-alone film but a direct sequel nonetheless, sees Motoko's persona fully merged into the global information network, leaving former squadmates Batou and Togusa to solve a series of murders alone. *Innocence* lacks the first film's clarity of purpose, in part because Oshii himself took over screenwriting duties from Kazunori Ito (*Dirty Pair*, the *Patlabor* movies), resulting in hardboiled detectives quoting Descartes and Milton in out-of-character philosophical soliloquies. It doesn't help that, in contrast with the original's pioneering compositing work, the CG in *Innocence* doesn't meld well with the 2D animation, making scenes feel uncomfortably detached from reality.





## HOST IN THE SHELL: STAND ALONE COMPLEX

As sacrilegious as it may be, while Mamoru Oshii's original theatrical film remains the most well-known incarnation of *Ghost in the Shell*, I consider *Stand Alone Complex*, the television series directed by Oshii protégé Kenji Kamiyama, the best. The reason is duration: Oshii's *Ghost in the Shell* isn't even an hour and a half long, whereas both seasons of *Stand Alone Complex* unfold over 52 episodes and THEN it does its own take on the "Puppeteer" storyline by way of the film *Solid State Society*.

*Stand Alone Complex* consists of both "stand-alone" episodes featuring one-shot stories as well as "complex" episodes detailing an ongoing narrative. The films only give us glimpses of supporting cast members such as Togusa, Ishikawa, and Aramaki but in *Stand Alone Complex* we get to know them in greater detail along with many more members of Section 9 beyond Kusanagi and Batou. My favorites are the resident sniper, Saito, as well as the Tachikomas: AI-powered spider-legged tanks that neither of Oshii's films afford running time to. Maybe if they resembled basset hounds instead of spiders...?

Featuring lavish production values—the only thing to betray the series' age is some occasionally iffy CGI—plus a soundtrack by Yoko Kanno, the US is only finally getting the series on Blu-ray this year, so consider revisiting the series (or seeing it for the first time). They say we now live in an era of "prestige television," but maybe everyone's just catching up to what *Stand Alone Complex* demonstrated 15 years ago.

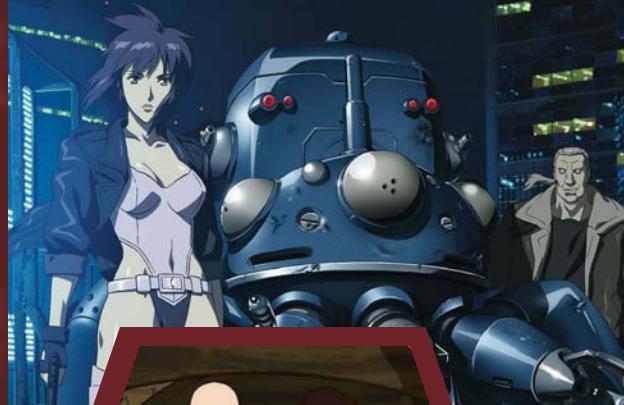
- Daryl Surat





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**HOST IN THE SHELL USES POWERFUL IMAGERY OF BLOATED CITYSCAPES AND CYBERNETIC BODIES TO EXPLORE THE MEANING OF IDENTITY AND MEMORY.**



Despite this, Oshii's directing is arguably even more ambitious than in the first movie. The action scenes are carefully shot and choreographed but gut-wrenching all the same, and a quiet moment of respite at Batou's apartment feels strangely true to life. Of course, freed from the constraints of negotiating with a writer, Oshii also includes his beloved basset hound as a constant presence. He's even in most of the movie posters!

### MS. KUSANAGI GOES TO HOLLYWOOD

Seemingly, Rupert Sanders's live-action film is taking its cues from Oshii's first film—not surprising, considering that Oshii's vision of Section 9 was so powerful that it essentially became the franchise's canonical one, overriding even Shiro's. Unfortunately, casting Scarlett Johansson as The Major (note the lack of the Japanese

"Motoko Kusanagi") not only seems an odd choice for such an unflappable character, but it's a slap in the face to Asian fans hoping to finally see more actors who look like them in lead roles.

What lessons will Sanders and his team take from the anime versions of *Ghost in the Shell*? Will they embrace an uncertain world of fallible memories and untrustworthy institutions? Or will they tell an arguably less compelling but simpler story of personal fulfillment? Will it have a basset hound in it? No matter what, the success or failure of the film will have big implications for the future of Hollywood adaptations of anime properties.



## BY INK

**D**on't let Emerson's "Life is a journey, not a destination" fool you. Sometimes, destinations can be their own journeys. Take, for instance, Kino (a perpetual traveler) and Hermes (an AI-imbued, talking motorcycle), who stay no longer than three days in any country they happen upon. During that time, Kino's journey mainly consists of exploring the local geographical area as well as the hearts of its people and experiencing (for better and worse) their customs. Moving from country to country like this keeps Kino from settling down, thus retaining her title as a traveler, and ensures a meaningful journey measured in observations as well as the kilometers between them.

*Kino's Journey* (*Kino no Tabi*), which adapts a light novel series by author and noted motorcycle enthusiast Keiichi Sigsawa, poses and stays true to one mantra: "The world is not beautiful, therefore it is." By repeatedly putting Kino in the role of a stranger in a strange land and presenting a series of emotional, social, and physical conflicts, this series captures the naked essence of an all-too-familiar humanity, despite the fictional landscapes and exaggerated personalities/cultures, for the true observer (the viewer) to appreciate and learn from. The situ-



# The LONG and WINDING ROAD

*Kino's Journey* reminds us  
that sometimes destinations  
can be their own journeys.

tions Kino experiences range from lighthearted to life threatening, and thankfully no tale is ever a one-note affair regarding tone or character. The same goes for Kino.

Viewers get to spend three episodes getting to know who Kino is before getting to know who Kino was, and Kino's origin story, as ultimately dark as it is initially adorable and ultimately allegorical, reflects the author's reverence for those who experience joy, sorrow, and everything in-between as the very definition of the

way to live. This underlying philosophy is all the more apparent in Kino's respect for life as well as the beauty of its transience, imperfection, and emotional intensity. Add in Kino's sense of detachment, and the natural way this anime unfolds its moral lessons and their ambiguities must be applauded.

Self-contained episodes, ranging from 15 to 30 minutes, might seem too short for such world building, but director Ryutaro Nakamura's patient pacing, with its balance of reflective

observation and action, makes each episode legitimately fulfilling (emotionally, narratively) in regard to individually showcased countries as well as the overall journey. Equally satisfying is how the time period in which *Kino's Journey* is set actually condones anachronisms. For example, there are robots in one country and mages in another but no cellular telephones or Internet. It is that sense of long-range disconnect that fosters belief in how different the values and aesthetics of each country Kino visits can be.

Aesthetically, *Kino's Journey* is instantly recognizable if for only one aspect: scanlines. This visual effect, applied by Nakamura, produces the feel of watching the series on a tube-based television, and the result is charming ... once you get used to it. This visual choice imparts an old-timey feel that fits in perfectly with the world of Kino. Underneath the filter, the art itself is simplistically beautiful. (Try to stop your jaw from dropping upon seeing the fish hook moon in "The Sad Land.") Even scenes of violence are artfully handled—graphic in necessity, as in the skinning of a rabbit for dinner between countries, or artful in gore (blood plumes and globules). And while the most memorable character designs border on abstract, great attention to facial expressions—especially Kino's perfect smirk—brings the cast to life.

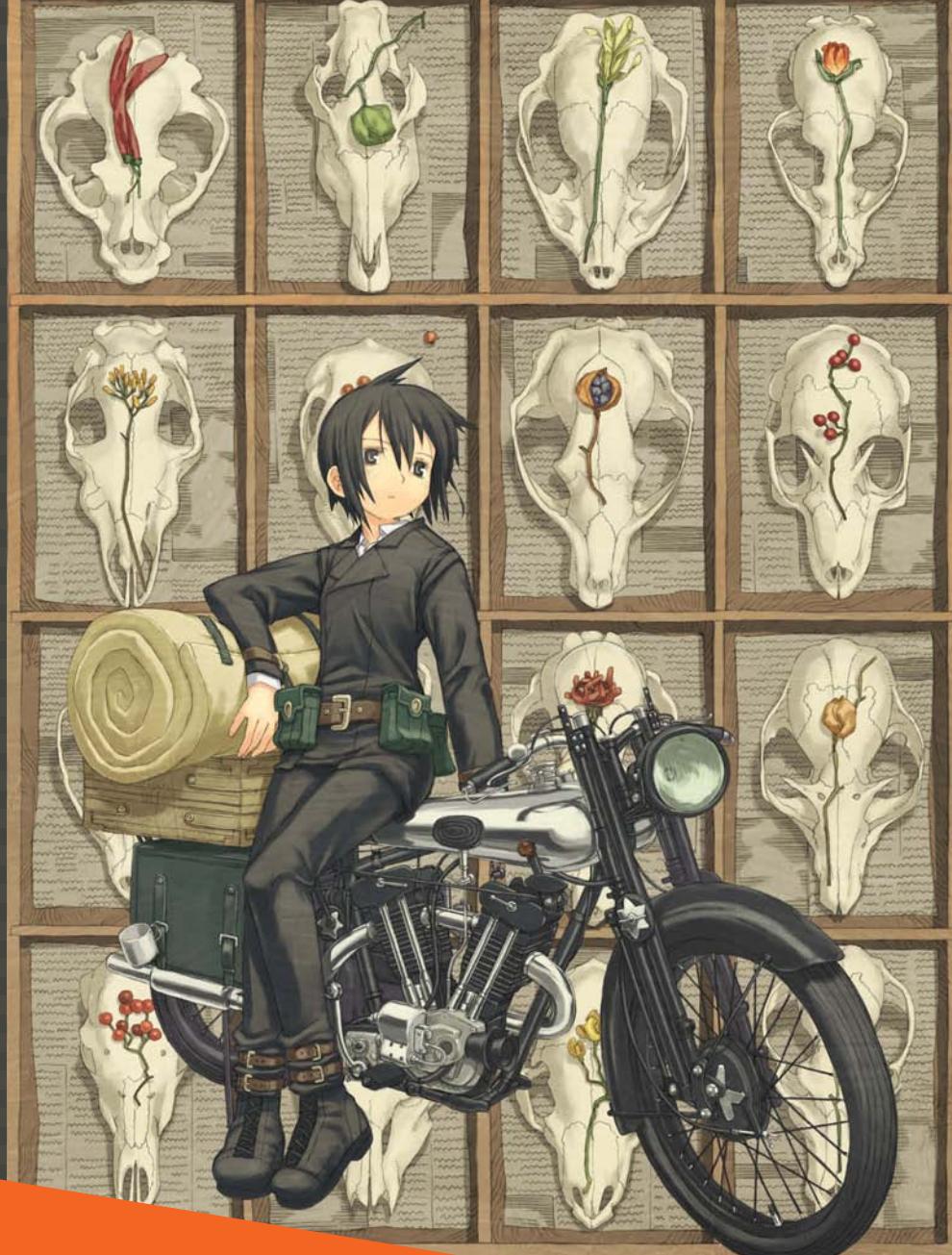
Similarly, Kelli Cousins does a wonderful job in relaying the subtleties and strength inherent in Kino's soft-spoken dialogue in the English dub. This plays well to the

## JOURNEY FORTH!

While it may be incredibly disappointing that, like the two half-hour *Kino* "films," 18 of the 19 light novels upon which the *Kino's Journey* anime was based were never made available in North America, there is at least one readily available book in which the souls of kindred travelers may take solace: Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities*. In this collection of short stories, a traveler (Marco Polo) describes places he's visited to Kublai Khan (and sometimes vice-versa). Fifty-five very short stories/portraits are separated, contrasted, and connected by theme—memory, desire, signs, names, and so much more—and each is portrayed with Calvino's divine sense of wonder and imagination. If you loved or come to love *Kino's Journey*, I highly suggest letting your mind wander as guided by a fictional Marco Polo.



traveler's androgynous character design; Kino's trademark cool is short hair, motorcycle goggles, an oversized trench coat, a couple of pistols (and an armory of knives), and a confident, nonchalant, almost debonair air. While Cousins comes across a little more feminine, Ai Maeda seems to be less easily distinguishable. Both serve and suit the character perfectly. Cynthia Martinez's Hermes, on the other hand, sounds like a robot with a



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## A VISUAL DIARY AND A SUBTLE NOD

Borrowing from Japanese literary tradition, the format/formula of the *Kino's Journey* anime combines the nikki's (diary) integration of travelogue and poetry with the Buddhist moral didacticism associated with kiko (poetic travel diaries). The resulting emotional overflow etches places and events as well as lessons learned therefrom into viewers' memories. Something cool to note is that women were primarily responsible for nikki as a literary form and making it widely popular. Kino's gender seems an empowering nod to the original writers of nikki, while her name and gender-ambiguous dress could be an allusion to Ki no Tsurayuki, who wrote, adopting a female persona, the Tosa nikki, which helped establish nikki as a formal art form in the Heian court's eyes.

smashed larynx or the tin-bowled Aaron Dismuke (Ed in the *Fullmetal Alchemist* dub) under the influences of a wicked cold or puberty, while Ryuji Aigase sounds similarly youthful but is much easier on the ears.

What's spoken is important, of course, but what goes unspoken and the silences that carry those moments are equally important (if not more so). That said, the ADR work is admirable, especially with such episodes as "The Sad Land," which keeps the heart of the poetry and necessary silences intact while providing dramatic localization, and the timing in the discourse between Kino and Hermes is tops. Opposed to dub, script occasionally tells too much via its own ambition in a series that, unlike most anime, shows instead of telling a lot of seemingly trivial moments that end up being the core of character exploration. In the moments without dialogue, there's only the background music and sound effects. There are a couple of themes that repeat

with variations depending on the mood at hand, and these fit the show so well that you might hardly realize you're hearing them.

Because its episodes are largely self-contained, *Kino's Journey* is one of those rare anime gems that can sit, infinitely ready for a sporadic rewatch (in whole or part), on anyone's media rack. Whether you visit one country or a few, the journey's always worth it. And there's more out there to discover! This collection contains Episodes 1-13, but two more episodes are out there: a prequel in which we discover how Kino trained to be a traveler, and another country-centric tale. As good now as it was when it was originally released in 2003, the series reflects the human condition so accurately that it is not one to leave the heart easily. I cannot recommend this series highly enough.

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***Kino's Journey* is available from Sentai Filmworks.**



*Nurse Witch  
Komugi R* is  
a return to  
the fun and  
innocence of  
the magical  
girl genre.

# A KIND OF MAGIC

*Nurse Witch Komugi* was a colorful, frenetic OVA that lasted for six episodes, originally released back in 2002. It was meant as a parodical spinoff of the series *Soul-Taker*, with several of the characters that appeared in that anime taking on weird parodical versions of their previous selves. It followed Komugi Nakahara, a young cosplayer idol with a secret: She's actually Nurse Witch Komugi, and she's endowed with special powers to fight off viruses from Vaccine World. It's a hilarious and raucous ride that parodies the magical girl genre, much like *Excel Saga* spears so many others, and while it has nods to its source series sprinkled throughout, it became very much its own beast in the end. It even got two additional OVA episodes released as a sequel in the form of *Nurse Witch Komugi-chan Magikarte Z*. Now, 14 years later, Komugi is back with the rest of her friends in the rebooted TV anime series *Nurse Witch Komugi R*. It's a whole new ball game, but it's Komugi's first real shot at making a name for herself in the grand scheme of TV episodes. What's more, even if you took in all of the old Komugi stories, you'll be able to appreciate this new series just as easily.

## LET'S KOMUGICATION!

From the opening scenes of *Nurse Witch Komugi R*, it's clear that this iteration of Komugi isn't interested at all in parodying the magical girl genre and is instead playing things straight with a CG-centric idol performance at the beginning of the first episode. Komugi is unfortunately interrupted during the middle of her concert, only to wake up and realize she was dreaming.

In this series, instead of working all the time as an idol and professional cosplayer, Komugi has a family, little brother, and is actually aspiring to become a famous idol and performer. She also has to go to school, so that adds an entirely new dynamic to the show. She's essentially the same Komugi we know from the other series, but she's a lot more childish and cut from the same cloth as other "magical girl" types out there. Her medical connection comes from her father, who's actually a physician. There's no random "vaccine" correlation from the beginning, but Komugi herself has a special ability to help out with her dad's patients, and she's plucky enough to get things done.

We find out how Komugi gets her start as a magical girl pretty early on. When she



By Brittany Vincent



happens upon a small, injured creature known as Usa-P, Komugi provides some medical treatment and gets the creature fighting fit once more. In exchange, Usa-P offers special magical powers that allow Komugi to become a "Tombo-E Girl." It's up to her to save the world from droves of bizarre enemies, including crazy enemies that change people into other forms in the name of film and a whole host of other weirdness. Though the show's overall tone has changed, it still retains plenty of the silliness the original *Nurse Witch Komugi* displayed.

### FRIENDSHIP IS MAGIC

Komugi won't be doing it alone this time around, however. In the *Nurse Witch Komugi* OVA series, Komugi fought against and sometimes alongside rival Koyori Kokubunji, who worked with Komugi as an idol and cosplay model. There's Kokona Saionji, one of the main characters, whose appearance is somewhat similar to Koyori's though she has short blue hair and is actually Komugi Yoshida's fellow idol and schoolmate. As the second Tombo-E girl, the Magical Maid character, her magical girl getup resembles that of a maid. She's a kind, gentle soul, though while she's transformed she tends to go into sort of a "bold" side that has her



doing a multitude of weird and brazen things that she doesn't always retain memory of when she's gone back to normal. She has her own mascot character named Tana-P, and she's gunning to be the #1 idol of all time.

Then there's Tsukasa Kisaragi, the third Tombo-E girl, who runs into the mascot character Neko-P. He allows Tsukasa to transform into the Magical Sister persona, which like Magical Nurse and Magical Maid, has its own outfit. She'll normally wear more masculine clothing in public, but when transformed her outfit resembles that of a Catholic Sister's dress with cat ears and a tail. She's more of a tomboy when she's dressed as a civilian, but when she's transformed her girlier side comes out. It's an interesting duality, especially when she and Komugi are such close friends and nearly like night and day.

These characters come in stark contrast to those from the *Nurse Witch Komugi* past. They're all varying personalities without so much of the snark and cutting lines the OVA would often spotlight, and as such the show ends up feeling more like a *Pretty Cure* or *Cardcaptor Sakura* parody than anything else. These new characters and relationship dynamics work well for the new show's attitude, however, which makes it much more accessible as a whole for newcomers to the characters and franchise.

## A NEW LEGACY FOR KOMUGI

The *Nurse Witch Komugi* name has been around for quite some time, so it's interesting that the anime world has come back around to explore the show once more. However, trends have changed since the show was in vogue back during its debut in 2002.

When *Nurse Witch Komugi* first came out, it was much more popular for silliness, references to other anime, and the "Gainax" style of anime with the mile-a-minute dialogue, ridiculous jokes, sight gags, and more. The lines on the characters were thicker. Things were brighter, more flamboyant, and crazy.

You can really tell how things have changed and how the world has been altered to attempt to hook a modern audience, especially with the attention paid to CGI-fueled idol performances and the moe style of animation. Side by side, the two would be nearly unrecognizable if you didn't know they were supposed to be in the same universe, but that might be exactly what the franchise needs if it's to be reborn and reach a new audience.

## GETTING MAGICAL WITH KOMUGI

There's been a legacy of darker magical girl shows over the past couple of years, and it seems to be a growing trend. *Nurse Witch Komugi R* is a return to the magic and innocence of the genre, and while it's somewhat parodical in some instances, it's very much a fun romp that you should take even if you already watched the OVA episodes. It's got just the right amount of raunchiness and hilarity, and if you're a magical girl fan, you definitely owe it to yourself to check it out.

*Nurse Witch Komugi R* is available from Sentai Filmworks and Crunchyroll.



## DON'T LET THE MAGIC FADE!

If you watch *Nurse Witch Komugi R* and you like what you see, there's still more to hungrily devour after you power through both the OVA *Nurse Witch Komugi* and *Nurse Witch Komugi-chan Magikarte Z!*

You can start with the manga series, which originally ran in 2003 in *Young Animal Arashi*. It only spanned two volumes, but it was an interesting addition to the world of Komugi, if you're interested in seeing how the anime translates to manga.

There was also a game released for PlayStation 2 back in 2004 called *Nurse Witch Komugi-chan Magikarte Show*, which was a fairly standard platformer with adorable sprite illustrations of the familiar characters.

You might even want to check out the series *SoulTaker*, which spun off the original character Komugi Nakahara. It is a rewarding and exciting series with a whole lot darker premise and somewhat more confusing setup. But if you really want to get to the roots of the show, this is the best place for you to start.

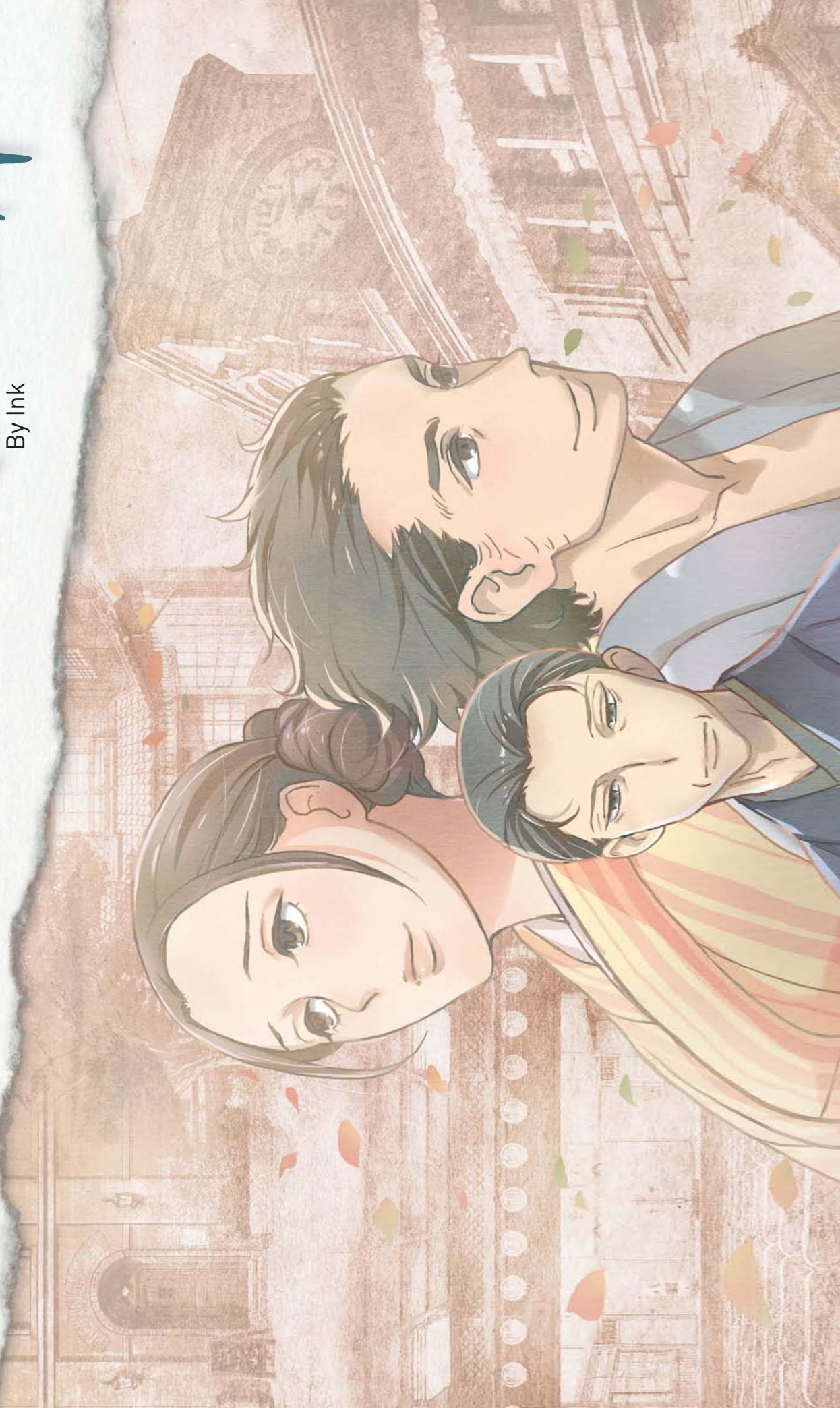


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**NURSE WITCH KOMUGI R HAS THE RIGHT AMOUNT OF RAUNCHINESS AND HILARITY, AND IF YOU'RE A MAGICAL GIRL FAN, YOU DEFINITELY OWE IT TO YOURSELF TO CHECK IT OUT.**

# THE ART OF STORYTELLING

By Ink



SHINJU IS A  
GENROKU RAKUGO  
SHOW & LOVING TRIBUTE TO A CLASSIC ART FORM.



**D**uring his prison sentence, inmate Kyoji develops a deep love for rakugo—the Japanese art of comedic storytelling (see sidebar)—as well as a burning desire to perform it. And since his rakugo idol, the eighth generation Yakumo, happens to be performing nearby soon after Kyoji's release, he decides to plead for an apprenticeship. While trying to prove he's worthy of Yakumo VIII's tutelage, Kyoji learns of another rakugo performer (Sukeroku), whose delivery he comes to admire greatly, as well as the relationship between Sukeroku, Yakumo VIII, and the woman called Konatsu. *Showa Genroku Rakugo Shinju* is story within a story about people who tell stories, and it's one for the anime history books in terms of structure and sheer dramatic power.

Even if reading this review is the first time you've encountered the word *rakugo*, don't worry; the anime makes everything clear in how it introduces this very simple to explain but difficult to master art and by featuring drastically contrasting amateur and master performances. Sure, watching an anime that occasionally consists of focusing on a single character who sits in place and performs a monologue for 10 minutes straight might sound like it would be unbearable, but the integration of imagined visual effects from the story being told, superimposed over

and synchronized with select Yakumo mannerisms, increases the dramatic effect of the performance and stuns the heart through the eyes. Furthermore, the voice actors, choice of story for the rakugo performance, and context in which it's being used enhance the drama tenfold.

Most of the drama takes place via flashback. Two boys, Bon and Shin, respectively come to be apprentices under the current master by way of a favor owed and unique talent. From there, it's a battle of craft versus popularity, tradition versus rebellion, brother versus brother. Bon, who is given the name of Kikuhiko by the then current master (seventh generation Yakumo), plays the straight man to Shin and performs a very refined rakugo. Shin, who reluctantly takes the name Sukeroku from the same master, becomes a slovenly boozehound and tail chaser renowned for his wild and comedic on-stage delivery. These contrasts, in work and daily life, spur conflict on multiple levels—domestically, professionally, romantically—and they're not always resolved directly. That's where the rakugo comes in.

The brotherly apprentices build bonds and mend ties as life takes them in different directions. With them always is rakugo, the common love they cannot shake, and it's used to communicate apologies and accusations via the stories chosen as well as the way in which they're told. These stories also offer parallels as commentary on the anime's plot and have the bonus

effect of putting anime viewers directly in an anime by saving them a seat in the theater for the performance. (Talk about engrossing.) But the tales aren't just told for immediate effect; several tales are repeated enough throughout the series to become easily recognizable—with all the weight from previous situations in which they were orated. And when those same stories are read and heard by different characters, the emotional impact is compounded to mean a great deal more within the context of the current scene.

Adding to the drama is background scoring, which ranges from taiko and samisen to solo strings, jazz, and big band swing. The simplicity and effectiveness of the biwa and taiko, again,

really make viewers feel like they're watching a rakugo performance in a theater. (Biwas are used in the anime to introduce the actor as he walks onto the stage.) The same instruments are also occasionally used in the soundtrack to reinforce the rising action and give each rakugo story's climax more punch. The solo strings and swing/jazz arrangements play a big part in setting the era in which the anime takes place. (Pacific-placed ocean liners in the 1910s, and the U.S. soldiers of occupying forces in World War II played a huge role in bringing jazz to Japan and growing its popularity.) The liveliness of the swing/jazz arrangements in the

**SHOWA GENROKU  
RAKUGO SHINJU  
IS ONE FOR THE  
ANIME HISTORY  
BOOKS IN TERMS  
OF STRUCTURE  
AND SHEER  
DRAMATIC POWER.**



series contrasts some of the more reserved stage performances and brings swagger and energy to scenes outside the theater. And a jazzy OP with bass-driven song, “Usurahi Shinju,” by Megumi Hayashibara offers the perfect prelude to each episode.

*Showa Genroku Rakugo Shinju* takes place during the Showa Era (1926–1989) and uses this time period of turbulence and transition to great effect. To start, there’s the *Singing in the Rain* parallel. It’s easy to liken the declining popularity of silent films and rakugo when faced with, respectively, the advent and growing popularity of talkies and movies/TV. But this period of time also affords a wonderful opportunity to explore the importance and different roles of art in times of peace and war as well as a chance to examine how both affect artists and those they love. A classic art form and changing times also encourage a range of beautiful sets and character designs.

Whether in a bustling city or the quiet of a small country town, the detail in backgrounds is wonderful, and the characters’ visages seem realistically (without exaggeration) shaped by the emotions trying to rise to the surface. Kikuhiko (both young and old) can seem outright menacing in his coldness and offers a great canvas for a multitude of characters, Sukeroku is drawn warmly like a playful baboon but wears a face long enough to pity, and Konatsu’s “tomboyish” design is flexible enough to relay her willfulness and vulnerability while offering the camera the type of hidden beauty that drives imaginations wild.

It’s positively astounding that an anime based on a niche art with only subtle flare gained such popularity and respect. *Showa Genroku Rakugo Shinju* appeared on several best-of-the-year lists and was nominated for four categories—Best Opening, Best Boy, Best Drama, and Anime of the Year—in Crunchyroll’s 2016 Anime Awards.

And when you consider that this show premiered as a Winter 2016 title (the first season of the anime viewing year) and that the extremely popular *Yuri!!! on Ice* closed out Fall 2016 (the last season of the anime viewing year), that means something this series accomplished struck viewers hard and stuck with them despite all the shows that came after. Have a seat, brace yourself, and just try to keep from applauding after the final bow. And after you’ve watched once, watch it again and marvel at all the effort the story puts into paralleling characters and situations—reactions to things said that seem off at first and then heartbreaking when you’re in the know.

*Showa Genroku Rakugo Shinju* is available from Crunchyroll.



## RAKUGO: A BRIEF HISTORY AND THE BASICS

Although rakugo originated way back from Buddhist sermons and climbed to peak popularity during the Edo period (1603–1867), it is still practiced today. A traditional rakugo performance consists of one person, equipped with hand towel and paper fan as allowable props, reciting a story that lasts approximately 30 minutes and involves at least two characters. During the performances, the actor adopts different voices, facial expressions, and mannerisms to distinguish the characters from one another. Rakugo was, like yaro kabuki, a mens-only affair originally but has opened up to female and even foreign performers.

## THE STORIES CONTINUE

As of the time of this review, the second season of *Showa Genroku Rakugo Shinju* (*Descending Stories*) has just started airing.

What makes the first season so great is how well the lengthy main story develops the frame story characters, and now it’s finally their turn to shine. Who

knows what those stories will be or how they’ll unfold: flashbacks, flash forwards, parallel universes? Okay, probably not the latter, but I’m hyped as all get out to find out! Head on over to Crunchyroll to dig into some superb storytelling about superb storytelling.



## Slime Convict Terror

### New live-action releases

#### The Green Slime

Amazingly, before the international acclaim of *Battle Royale* toward his life's end, B-movie maverick Kinji Fukasaku's best known picture



DISTRIBUTOR  
Warner Archives  
ORIGINALLY RELEASED  
1968  
RUNNING TIME  
99 Minutes

*Gamma One* series, *The Green Slime* is an indelibly campy 1960s psychotronic flick that specializes in fun and stupidity.

It's the spacefaring retro future and an asteroid's headed for Earth.



Military hardass Jack Rankin (Robert Horton) is sent on a mission to blow it up with estranged buddy Vince Elliot (Richard Jaeckel), commander of space station Gamma III. Rankin holds him in contempt for being too beta nice guy and they're all the saltier because Elliot is engaged to Rankin's ex-flame (Luciana Paluzzi). As explosives are rigged, scientist in tow Dr. Halvorsen (Ted Gunther) finds a yucky green substance everywhere. Against greater odds than Ben Affleck ever hoped, they blast it and get away. On

Stateside was likely this one, made fairly early in his career. An international co-production shot at Toei Studios with Japanese staff and Western thespians made as an intended follow up to Antonio Margheretti's

This was the first tokusatsu production Fukasaku directed, being brought in per his action foundation and reputation for budget efficiency. He had interest in spinning the story as a subtle Vietnam parable, but the backers wanted an artless programmer that would fill seats the world over in unpretentious venues from 42nd Street to rural drive-ins. With help from television helmer Katsuhiko Taguchi (later a force in *Kamen Rider*), Fukasaku delivered. A rare tokusatsu picture with an entirely Western cast, aside from the three leads, the supporting roles are a who's who of Japan's ex-pat thespian community. There's Robert Dunham, "diamond G-man" Mark Jackson in *Dogora*, and later the toga-clad Emperor in *Godzilla vs. Megalon*. Also there's bit player William Ross, who ran a Tokyo-based studio called Frontier that provided English-dubbed versions for many Japanese films in the 60s. Dunham frequently dubbed there, as did supporting player Budd Widom. Cathy Horan (*Goke*), Linda Hardesty (*Ultraseven*), and Linda Miller (*King Kong Escapes*) also appear. Frontier itself handled the looping for the US version.

Hardly at his top forms a director, Fukasaku nonetheless produces a pulpy sci-fi film that will make some viewers thumb their nose but keep those who like old-school cool satisfied. If technical excellence is what you're after, just watch MGM's other sci-fi release





that year: *2001: A Space Odyssey*. The miniature work, made by ex-Toho staff who mentored under Tsuburaya, is surprisingly stellar and the film's opening well handled. Impressive stop motion and visual trickery are here and there. The titular creatures look like Sid and Marty Kroft show rejects and were inhabited by schoolchildren but are at least amusing. One gets the sense perhaps Dan O'Banion was watching this on late night TV half in the bag while writing *Alien*. Add a rocking English theme song and you've got something that pairs well with your choice of cheap beer.

The Japanese version is actually shorter, with a fairly different soundtrack (sans song) and a quickened pace axing the Horton-Paluzzi-Jaeckel love triangle subplot, leaving a film with a heavier emphasis on the hard sci-fi elements but less fun. No doubt thanks to this film, Fukasaku would direct more co-productions in the years ahead, starting with running a unit (with similarly sensibilities Toshio Masuda) on the Japanese sequences of *Tora! Tora! Tora!* after Kurosawa departed and continuing with *Star Wars* cash-in *Message from Space* with Vic Morrow. This peaked with Kadokawa's megabucks disaster epic *Virus* (1980), which failed to find much interest overseas as intended. Notably, the character whose actions result in the titular pathogen of that film being released is also named Rankin. Coincidence or deliberate homage?

- J.L. Carrozza



## Female Convict Scorpion: Jailhouse 41

Few films offer as eclectic an experience as 1972's *Female Convict Scorpion: Jailhouse 41*, a picture that could only have come from that glorious house of sex and gratuitous violence in the 70s: Toei Studios. A sequel and sort of *Empire Strikes Back* to the same year's *Female Prisoner 701's New Hope* except with considerably more rape than *Star Wars*, director Shunya Ito crafts a movie that uncomfortably straddles the line between art film and exploitation sleazefest.

Nami Matsushima (Meiko Kaji), known as Sasori (Scorpion), is incarcerated in an underground dungeon as punishment for the events of the previous movie. Allowed out during an inspection, she attacks her nemesis, sadistic warden Goda (Fumio Watanabe), with a shiv fashioned from a spoon, inciting a riot among the female prisoners. An incensed Goda forces the women to brutally

labor and has Nami tied to a cross and violated by multiple guards in front of them. On their way back to prison, Nami and a group of the women prisoners, led by the sociopathic Oba (Kayoko Shirashi), manage to escape. Soon they are on the lam across the Japanese countryside with Goda and his men on their tail, leading to a showdown with the girls hijacking a tour bus and taking hostages.

Based on a manga by Toru Shinohara, the first film was more a straight-on women in prison kind of movie, albeit with surrealistic flair. *Jailhouse 41*, despite its title, is for the most part a hellishly messed-up road movie with possibly the richest aesthetic of any Japanese exploitation flick. Director Ito, later to co-direct the *Lupin III* anime *Farewell to Nostradamus*, clearly learned quite a bit from the first film, his debut. He goes all out with an impressive surrealistic mise-en-scene and stylistic flair that would make Alejandro Jodorowsky green with envy, throwing everything in his arsenal in a visceral all-out assault on the viewer. Japanese theater-style set pieces akin to Masaki Kobayashi's acclaimed *Kwaidan*, atmospheric colored lighting like something out of a Mario Bava flick, negative printing, wide angle lenses, skewed dutch angles, freeze frames, staccato editing, and more are all on hand to scorch the retina. The other entries used many of these far-out stylistic flourishes too, but only in *Jailhouse 41* does it feel truly technically masterful and in line with the narrative and thematic elements.

Ito's direction and the film's narrative manage to walk that razor-thin line between the arthouse and the grindhouse, being both the kind of film aimed at the deplorable types amused by violated female flesh and a feminist screed that would make Andrea Dworkin blush. The movie never forgets that the people who go to see these kinds of films are less concerned with the subtext and more with seeing a good amount of blood and female skin, both of which are amply provided. Yet in these films, men are beasts at worst and cowards at best, the sole cause of misery for our lady protagonist, a sort of anti-Yamato Nadeshiko endowed with an unbreakable strength and an uncanny ability to resist until the bitter end. The film is impressively acted. Meiko Kaji (Lady Snowblood herself), speaking barely three lines of dialogue, is captivating as always but the real standout is Kayoko Shirashi as the vulgar and at times fairly terrifying Oba, a brutal woman who inspires both revulsion and pity.

*Female Convict Scorpion: Jailhouse 41* can be viewed on Amazon Prime and on Blu-ray in a new box set from Arrow Entertainment.

- J.L. Carrozza



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DISTRIBUTOR  
Cinema Epoch  
ORIGINAL RELEASED  
1990  
RUNNING TIME  
107 minutes

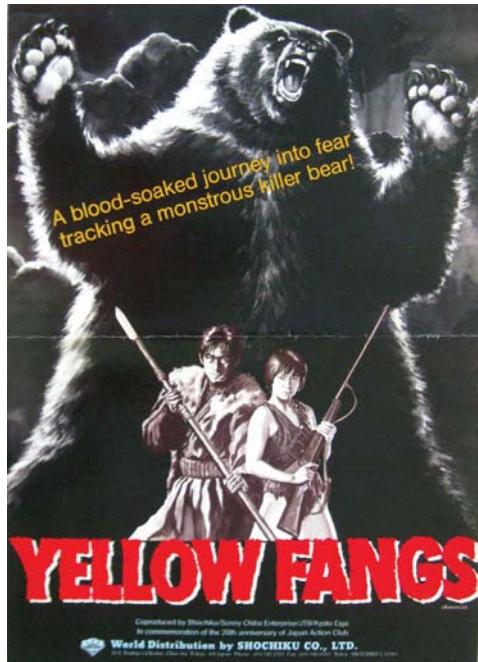
## Yellow Fangs: Grizzly Terror

In the winter of 1915 in rural Hokkaido, a starving brown bear awoke from hibernation and terrorized the village of Sankebetsu, killing 7 people in a rampage that lasted 5 days before the unfortunate beast was finally slain by local hunters. Known as the

Sankebetsu brown bear incident, the attacks inspired numerous works of fiction, including novels such as 1965's Kuma Kaze ("The Bear Wind") and 1977's Kuma Arashi ("The Bear Storm"), as well as a 1980 radio drama, a 1986 stage-play, and several volumes of the Yasei Densetsu ("The Wild Legend") manga. Imagery related to the incident even pops up in the 2015 TV anime, Yurikuma Arashi. The Sankebetsu brown bear incident is also the basis for Sonny Chiba's directorial debut, a 1990 drama known as Yellow Fangs: Grizzly Terror in English and as Remains: Utsukushiki Yuushatachi ("Remains: Beautiful Heroes") in Japanese.

Yellow Fangs takes the premise of the Sankebetsu brown bear incident and punches up the melodrama. Instead of a starving brown bear roaming the countryside in search of food, the ursine antagonist of Yellow Fangs is a malevolent, almost supernatural creature with a taste for human flesh: the bear called Kesagake (known as "Red Spots" in the translation) will only dine on beautiful human women. Instead of 5 days of terror, the events of Yellow Fangs encompass more than a year as a group of 5 stoic bear-hunters track Kesagake all across the frozen wilderness. The film also adds a tragic romance between the young bear-hunter Eiji (played by Hiroyuki Sanada) and Yuki (played by Mika Muramatsu). After Yuki's family is killed by Kesagake, the grief-struck girl vows to hunt the bear down, but village law will not allow women to become hunters. Determined to prove that she is as capable as any man, Yuki heads to the bear-infested mountains with the family dog and her father's rifle in tow.

Yellow Fangs is clearly low-budget, but it excels in several areas: the cine-



matography is excellent, especially the long-distance shots of the hunters traversing the snow-covered mountainside. The camera-work and editing are especially good at conveying scenes of desperate action and emotional turmoil, and the sound effects mixing

conveys the snuffling, snarls, and slurping sounds of the bear in a manner that is genuinely suspenseful. The music (also by Hiroyuki Sanada) is strange and ethereal, using everything from flutes to sleigh bells to convey the cold impartiality of the wintery

necessity. If that's not possible, one should hide the bear with quick edits and darkness, giving the audience only an impression of the ursine in order to maintain the tension. *Yellow Fangs* boldly flouts this idea. When *Kesagake* is not represented by obvious nature

landscape. The film owes some of its success to the directorial efforts of Sonny Chiba and some to the supervision of veteran film-maker Kinji Fukasaku. The pair previously collaborated on films such as *Wandering Detective* and *Message from Space*.

For a movie about a rampaging bear, a convincing bear suit is a bare stock footage, the murderous bear is instead embodied by the hokiest bear suit imaginable. I've seen a rubber mutant bear gleefully murder campers in the 1979 creature feature *Prophecy*. I've seen Lou Ferrigno toss a bear into space in the 1983 Hercules film. I've never seen a bear suit as floppy and moth-eaten as the one used for *Kesagake* in *Yellow Fangs*. Its decrepitude is an accidental work of art, a masterpiece of questionable cinematic decisions. I love it.

Released on DVD by Cinema Epoch, *Yellow Fangs* is also (at the time of this writing) available on Amazon Prime's streaming video service. I highly recommend it.

*Yellow Fangs* isn't a horror movie. It's a somber meditation on changing gender roles, the encroachment of modern humanity on the natural world, and the slow dwindling of traditional lifestyles, but if you can bear with the central conceit and if you don't find the cheesy bear suit unbearable, you'll find *Yellow Fangs* hits the Goldilocks spot: it's just right.

- Paul Thomas Chapman

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## Final Fantasy XV

Blazing new trails across Eos



PUBLISHER	Square Enix
DEVELOPER	Square Enix
SYSTEM(S)	PlayStation 4, Xbox One
AVAILABLE	Now
RATING	T

Although *Final Fantasy* titles are numbered, each one is different. While they're all tied together by common themes and references, they each forge their own story in their own worlds. For *Final Fantasy XV* to be a success, though, it had to be even more different from its predecessors than normal. It had to completely shatter expectations and offer a wealth of content that simply doesn't quit, even in the face of adversity and the naysayers. There are many who say the Japanese RPG has no place in today's more dynamic, more action-oriented gaming environment, but *Final Fantasy XV* takes a classic formula from an iconic series and updates it to a more modern, fluid standard. From this standpoint, there hasn't been a better *Final Fantasy* in quite some time.

Ten years in development usually isn't a good sign for a game (just ask Gearbox's *Duke Nukem Forever* development team), but in *Final Fantasy XV*'s case, it seems like that extra time just helped form a more cohesive and detailed end product. The world of Eos feels vital and connected in a way that rarely presents itself in video games. There's typically some fourth-wall moment in every game that breaks the illusion that you're occupying another person's life in a different world and puts you firmly back in your chair with controller in hand. *Final Fantasy XV* manages to avoid these issues with myriad tiny details that combine to bring Noctis and his friends' environment to life.

Unlike its predecessors, *Final Fantasy XV* gives you the freedom to roam the lands of Lucis almost right off the bat. After a brief intro, your car breaks down and you have to make your way to the outpost of Hammerhead to get it repaired. There main characters Noctis, Gladiolus, Ignis, and Prompto meet Cindy and her father Cid, who run a garage and will help you throughout the game. Since Noctis and the gang are short on cash, Cindy asks you to do some errands for her while she repairs the car, which introduces you to *Final Fantasy XV*'s quest system. After you complete these tasks your car, the Regalia, is fixed and the whole province of Leide, a big chunk of land, is opened for you to explore at will.

What a land it is, too! Since *Final Fantasy VII*, the *Final Fantasy* series has been known for its breathtaking use of cinematics, but for the first time there's no need for prerendered video here.



*Final Fantasy XV* is a gorgeous game and scenes that play out in real-time are comparable to gaming cinematics from just a few years ago. It's absolutely stunning, with some scenes offering a realism that's never quite been reached with this type of technology, at least on this system. Hair and feathers get an intricate rendering that I've only seen on high-end PC games before, and sometimes it's easy to forget that you're watching a game. Noctis and his friends all possess the ability to be wildly emotive, and the outstanding graphics, both in environments and characters, help complement the storytelling tremendously.

Previous *Final Fantasy* games have afforded players a larger cast to choose from in composing their parties, one that was recruited over the course of the story. *Final Fantasy XV* boldly departs from that tradition, though, and instead you only have four party members, and they're each with you from the outset of your journey. Noctis and his cadre develop what are probably the most authentic and sincere relationships over the course of *Final Fantasy XV* than in any other game seen to date. Although they have a very J-Rock look to their wardrobe, the four men who make up the main cast are far from stereotypical. Noctis, Gladiolus, Ignis, and Prompto all have their own talents, their own likes and dislikes, and their own take on each situation. It

may be clichéd to suggest this, but you'll most certainly find one to call a favorite only a short time into the game, what with Prompto's penchant for photography, Ignis's decadent cooking skills, and the simple manner in which they interact with one another.

By avoiding stereotypical character archetypes in *Final Fantasy XV*, Square Enix can give the plot and the characters in it more plausibility, and instead of playing through someone else's tale I found myself actually empathizing with Noctis and the plight he faces as prince of the vulnerable Kingdom of Lucis. As the story progresses, we get to see Noctis grow into his role of responsibility naturally, with the help and companionship of his friends. By the time the credits rolled I found myself caring about Eos and Lucis more than any other *Final Fantasy* world to date.

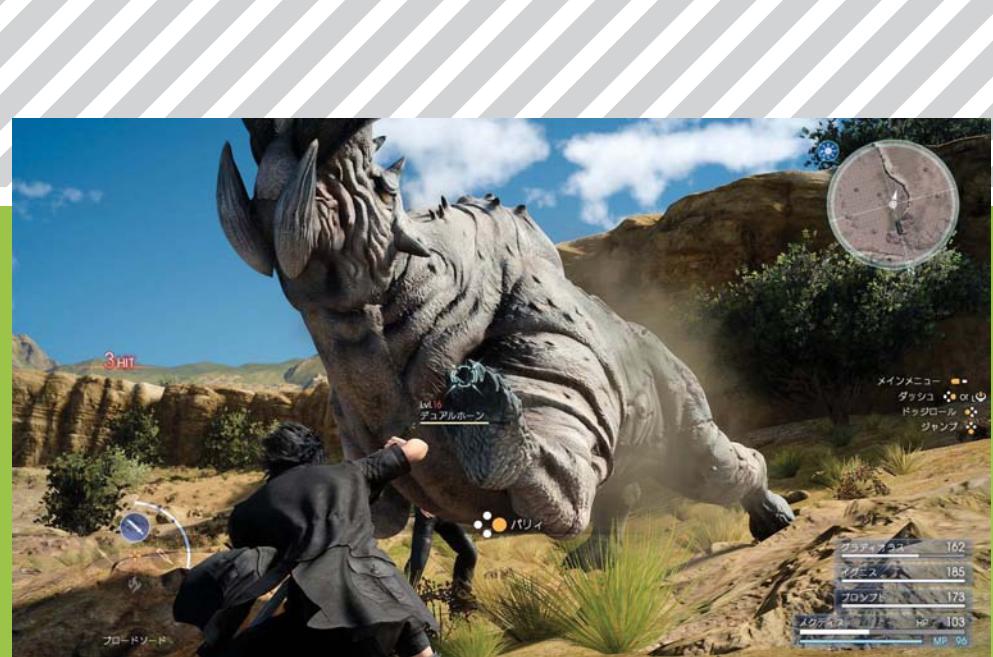
The changes to the *Final Fantasy* formula don't just stop at characterization, though. *Final Fantasy XV* has more in common with action-RPGs like *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* and *Dragon Age: Inquisition* than with its predecessors, and while that may turn series loyalists off, it's one of the best moves that could have been made here. Eos isn't a world that you're shepherded through by happenstance and fate—it's the world you're free to embrace as much or as little of as you want. There are plenty of side quests, powerful



items, and crafting to be had in the wilderness of Lucis. However, if you want to bypass all of that for a more traditional *Final Fantasy* experience, you can just stay on the beaten path and the game will let you move from narrative to narrative without penalizing you.

If you choose to embrace the openness of Lucis, there's plenty waiting for you. Chocobos return with a vengeance in *Final Fantasy XV* and are your primary mode of off-road travel. A few hours into the game you get the chance to complete a quest that afterward will allow you to rent Chocobos from kiosks across Lucis. Once you've rented a Chocobo, you can open your menu and whistle for it and your Chocobo will come wherever you are. There are also Chocobo races and the ability to customize your Chocobo with new colors and medals! Your fine-feathered friends play a large role in the game, and that will likely thrill fans both old and new—they're absolutely adorable, after all.

Noctis and friends also have personal hobbies in which you can take part. Noctis likes to fish, and indeed there's a full-fledged fishing game within *Final Fantasy XV* with different fishing equipment, fish species, and locations. Gladiolus has survival skills that allow him to find items that will help you in battle. Ignis can cook a host of different foods that boost your



stats, and finding new recipes is a major side quest in the game. Prompto takes pictures, and you will get the chance to save tons of great snaps at the end of each day to keep in remembrance of your adventure.

Combat takes a more active tone in *Final Fantasy XV* than in previous entries in the series and plays out more like *Kingdom Hearts*' system. Holding one button executes regular attacks while holding another will defend and evade. There is a bit of timing to get down, but for the most part just holding either button will

let you execute the basics of battle. Noctis can warp around the arena, and this figures heavily into battle strategy. If you're low on HP, you can warp to a Warp Point, and Noctis will begin to recover. Magic is different too, acting much more like an area-effect grenade. You refine your magic using the Elemancy skill and draw it from Elemancy deposits that are much like *Final Fantasy VIII*'s draw points.

The only drawback to combat and my only issue with the game, in general, is that the camera cannot keep up with the fast-paced action. The camera works fine out of combat or when you're fighting in an open area, but in dungeons and other tight spaces, it can get a little frustrating trying to keep the enemy you want to attack in view. This can lead to some less-than satisfying affairs even when you're powered up to the max and want to completely destroy the enemy, but it's only a small niggle compared to the majesty of the rest of the game.

*Final Fantasy XV* is a triumph of the video gaming medium. It's a beautiful adventure with fantastic characters. Nuance after nuance stack on top of a lovely broad canvas filled with hours and hours of things to do. Some fans have doubted the *Final Fantasy* series' ability to stay relevant among modern gaming trends. Nostalgia, good side games, and lasting quality kept the series on life support in the years since the divisive *Final Fantasy XIII* series, but *Final Fantasy XV* brings it springing back to life. Minor flaws keep this title from being perfect, but don't let them dissuade you. If you're a fan of *Final Fantasy*, action-RPGs, or gaming in general, this is a must-buy game.

- Brittany Vincent

**ONLINE EXCLUSIVE:**  
One of the reviews we were really excited about couldn't fit into this issue, so check out our take on the '80s Japan explosion that is *Yakuza Q*, only at [www.otakuusamagazine.com!](http://www.otakuusamagazine.com!)



# Hatsune Miku: Project DIVA Future Tone

## Focusing on the rhythm of the night



Hatsune Miku, the tiny digital diva, has been racking up entries in her long-running video game series, and now most of them have made their way over to the West for adoring fans to pick up and fawn over. The latest in the list is *Hatsune Miku: Project DIVA Future Tone*, which launched this year as a PlayStation 4 exclusive, a first for the popular rhythm game series.

Sega's latest Miku outing is just as colorful and unique as ever, but it's a little less complete as a package than the other Miku games out there. This time around, *Hatsune Miku: Project DIVA Future Tone* is available as a free download, though it only comes with two songs and a few different outfits for you to try out. You'll have to purchase one or two of the available song packs, either Future

Sound or Colorful Tone, to add a total of 200+ songs to the package. You can also purchase both packs for one entry price, but considering the fact that the previous games come with the songs already packed on the disc, this is going to no doubt affect some players' buying decisions.

There's certainly a lot of content here to take



in, however, more than ever before, even though it's a straightforward rhythm game without all the seasonings of a storyline or other fun extras



# Fate/Extella: The Umbral Star

## The Fate series goes hack 'n slash



When you think of *Fate* games you tend to either land on visual novels with multiple routes (see: *Fate/stay night*) or ongoing mobile outings like *Fate/Grand Order*. Marvelous decided to take things in a different direction with *Fate/Extella: The Umbral Star*, a hack 'n slash action game starring Nero Claudius (Saber) and a host of Servants both fresh and familiar. As you might have guessed, that means we're pretty much squarely in *Fate/Warriors* territory, and it actually works pretty well for the most part.

The story of *Fate/Extella* is set after the events of the Holy Grail War in *Fate/Extra*. Nero and her master—aka the player avatar you choose at the beginning of the game—won the war, and they're currently sittin' pretty with full control over the Moon Cell Automaton computer.



of the Miku games past. The focus is squarely on completing songs, dressing up your Vocaloids, and then moving on. And while there's a glut of content, the experience is a bit poorer without the extra frills, even though there are enough songs to keep you busy for quite some time.

Core gameplay has been altered this time

around, as well, possibly in exchange for the lack of quirky extras. You'll still be pressing the same buttons along to the music as Miku and the other Vocaloid characters sing and dance along to the beat with choreographed numbers and various stages. But this time around there are some different additions such

as new holds and even a higher difficulty on the harder songs. Much of the rest is the same ground fans have tread before, albeit a bit more polished this time around, with plenty of accessories and modules to collect between both available song packs, or even if you choose to only purchase one.

*Hatsune Miku: Project DIVA Future Tone* is very much a barebones compilation of the games and songs that came before it, especially the ones that haven't yet made their way to an English-speaking audience. It's got a great mix of songs, and while it might be a little weird this time around to doff the niceties of



the previous games, it's still an excellent choice for Miku fans.

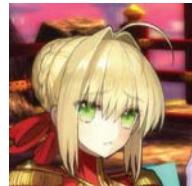
- Brittany Vincent

As proof of their victory they have possession of the Regalia ring, which lets them rule over the Servants that were previously their enemies in the war. Sounds more like the end of the story, right? That would be the case were it not for one inconvenient wrinkle: Tamamo no Mae somehow has a Regalia, as well as a copy of Nero's master, of her very own.

Thus begins the war over the digital realm and the core component of *Fate/Extella*'s game loop. As Nero and a handful of other playable Servants, players will battle huge mobs of enemies and take over territories one key at a time. Cutting through standard enemies is as close to a knife through hot butter as it gets, but the only way to secure an area is to take out any enemy-producing Plants and the Aggressors that hold the keys. Once you lock down the majority of a stage, the enemy Servants will present themselves for an intense boss battle.

If it sounds almost exactly like one of Omega Force's *Warriors* games, you're not too far off. There are a few mechanics that make it unique, however, and the back-and-forth rhythm of taking territories adds a real sense of urgency to each chapter. There's a degree of strategy to each mission, too. Not only do you need to prioritize taking the rooms with the most keys, you also need to swiftly move to rooms with specific objectives while constantly keeping an eye out for enemy invasions from other sectors. Once you get deep enough in the

game it ends up creating a unique back-and-forth of offense and defense, and it's mostly manageable as long as you stay on your toes. You'll need to watch out for fatigue in the long run, though, because you'll be seeing the same areas over and over, and many of the Side Stories offer



complete repeats of Story Mode missions, right down to the very flow of the action.

The proceedings outside of battle are definitely more "visual novel-y." There's a lot of text to go through, and the localization team did a great job of making it flow smoothly while interjecting enough humor to balance out all the drama. Conversations with Nero and other Servants allow you to increase your respective bonds. Once you get them high enough you'll



be treated to special event scenes, like, you know, watching Nero take a dip in a hot bath. Your relationship with Nero in particular can get a little over the top, sometimes making *Fate/Extella* a little embarrassing to play in front of others.

*Fate/Extella* may not be the best looking game, but Marvelous smartly utilizes its colorful visuals and smooth combat animations to make it all pop. I don't know how many non-*Fate* fans this one will attract, but I don't think that matters in the long run for this type of game. For everyone else there's a solid mix of fan service, genuinely fun action, and loads of side content to keep this one in your console library for quite some time.

- Joseph Luster

# Gravity Rush 2

## Sleeper hit gets a worthy sequel



**PUBLISHER**  
Sony Interactive Entertainment

**DEVELOPER**  
SIE Japan Studio, Project Siren

**SYSTEM(S)**  
PlayStation 4, PS Vita

**AVAILABLE**

Now

**RATING**

T

showing that every PlayStation 4 owner should experience.

*Gravity Rush 2* picks up exactly where the first game left off, with a young Gravity Queen named Kat going on a mining mission along with her newfound friends post-completion of *Gravity Rush*'s events. The game is quick to assume you already know what's going on and why, so if you didn't pick up its predecessor you'll absolutely

be left with several questions throughout the adventure unless you do a little outside research.

Still, there are plenty of scenes,



helpful bits of dialogue, and other information to help you piece things together if you go in blind. Getting to know the immediately likable and engaging heroine Kat and company is nearly as fun as playing the game, and you'll want to go back and see what you missed the first time

# Pokémon Moon

## Back in the Stoutland saddle again



**PUBLISHER**

Nintendo

**DEVELOPER**

Game Freak

**SYSTEM(S)**

Nintendo 3DS

**AVAILABLE**

Now

**RATING**

E

Most folks who picked up *Pok  mon Sun or Moon* did so with the context of having played at least a few of the recent entries before it. I, on the other hand, hadn't touched a mainline *Pok  mon* game since I was obsessed with the original *Pok  mon Red* back in the late 90s. I played that one on an old Game Boy brick, so imagine going from that in pure warp speed to the series as

it is today. With that in mind, *Moon* was guaranteed to be a trip for me no matter what, but I certainly didn't expect to get as wrapped up in it as I did.

Unlike me, dedicated fans of the series will recognize *Sun* and *Moon* as a natu-



ral iteration of previous games, but that doesn't mean it's without its own bold innovations. This time around the adventure has your personalized character moving to the land of Alola, which is essentially a Pok  -stand-in for Hawaii.

The sun-drenched island is a warm and welcoming backdrop for catching 'em all, and there



are a lot of Pok  mon to catch in this one.

In addition to wholly new creatures, *Pok  mon Sun and Moon* introduce the idea of "Alolan"



around, even if the characters all speak a made-up language. That only adds to the charm.

The game is comprised of various missions, ranging from taking an item to another character, mining ore, or fighting off the enemies that descend upon you utilizing Kat's amazing gravity powers. Kat can call upon an array of awesome physics-defying abilities that allow her to get around and mop the floor with bad guys. These lend the game a feeling of innovation, as they feel quite unlike anything else on the market, even though they're essentially a tweaked set of superhero-like abilities.

You can guide Kat around the game world with her "fall," which is almost like flying in reverse, or use one of her other fighting styles,

Lunar or Jupiter, to combat enemies while light as a feather or with a little more oomph. Whether you choose to take the fight to a floating gravel pit or a wall where Kat is nearly upside down, the controls are butter-smooth and you feel light on your feet no matter how you decide to proceed. During a short time at the beginning of the game when Kat is without her powers, regaining them and becoming able to pull off such impressive feats feels amazing, and that feeling doesn't go away as you progress.

The only thing that tends to become problematic is when camera angles keep you from locking on in certain situations. The entire camera system is quite finicky, unfortunately, which can

end in several cheap deaths.

There's plenty to do during the main story mode, but if you find that lacking you can always take part in the challenges and side quests that become available as you progress. There's easily 10-20 hours of story here, however, so there's no dearth of content.

*Gravity Rush 2* is an exciting, charismatic, and action-packed sequel to a game that desperately deserved one on a console. While it's not available on PlayStation Vita, the fact that it exists at all should be celebrated, especially as it's such a joy to play and rife with such interesting gravity powers. All hail Kat, the Gravity Queen, who has returned to claim her throne.

- Brittany Vincent

"forms" of existing Pokémon. This really just means that we get a slightly fresher experience when facing off against one of a thousand Rattatas, but it's still fun to see how they differentiate one form from the other. Being away from the series for so long meant that every other wild Pokémon encounter had me saying, "Oh, this must be a brand new one!", only to find out the 'Mon in question was introduced way back in *Sapphire* and *Ruby* or something. As for the Pokémon that are actually new, *Sun and Moon* have their own unique mix of duds and genuinely excellent designs.

Over the course of 30+ hours of catchin' and battlin', I was most impressed with the narrative steps they took in *Sun and Moon*. This one is much more story-driven than previous entries, paving the way for plenty of dramatic beats and a genuinely exciting climax. Of course, the game is far from over once you've become island champion. More than most adventures out there, *Pokémon* is as much about the post-game as it is the main quest. *Sun and Moon* keep things engaging after the credits roll thanks to additional quests, Pokédex completion and Global Missions that



have players around the world working toward the same goal. Sadly, the first two of these were colossal failures for players, but Game Freak and Nintendo are still working out the kinks to decide what's actually achievable (hint: catching 100 million Pokémon was not).

Having just played *Moon*, I can't speak to all of the minute differences between versions, other than knowing that, as usual, certain Pokémon are available in certain versions. Also par for the course, said Pokémon can be yours through the classic means of trading with friends. One difference I found kind of oddly charming was the swapping of day-night cycles in each version. In the case of *Moon*, it's always nighttime in-game when you play during the day, and, much like the freaks

themselves, the sun comes out at night. There isn't too much significance to this other than that jarring moment when you play in the morning and the Pokémon Center clerk exclaims, "My, you're up late!"

Combat is more fun than ever in *Pokémon Moon*, especially on the rare occasion that you get to team up with someone else to take on enemy Trainers. My one major complaint has to do with the SOS feature in wild battles. In an effort to, I suppose, make these encounters more challenging, wild Pokémon can call for help from their friends in the middle of a fight. All this does is drag these fights out interminably, though, especially if you're trying to catch a Pokémon. Since you can't use a Pokéball until there's just one Pokémon left, it often comes down to you keeping one enemy barely alive while the reinforcements keep coming. It's not fun.

Thankfully, the rest of *Pokémon Moon* is fun. Very fun, in fact. Fun enough to make someone well past the suggested expiry date of *Pokémon* fandom feel right at home in Alola.

- Joseph Luster



## Cosplay Quotes Encouragement from the experts!

HELLO FELLOW OTAKU! When I started cosplaying more than 10 years ago, I gained inspiration from the works and words of cosplayers that I looked up to. Cosplayers like Vampy Bit Me made me want to improve my craft and keep cosplaying even when I was so frustrated working a cosplay that I wanted to throw it in the trash.

Hopefully, the following quotes from other cosplayers do just that for you.

"If you can wear a costume and bring no drama, then you are a cosplayer."

- Eric The Smoke Moran

"The best feeling is when the kids' eyes light up because you are their favorite character come to life."

- Abi Sue Cosplay

"Don't ever feel restricted with your art, express yourself, smile, and have fun."

- CookinInTights

Ani-Mia & Lolitabot - Maze Studio

"Whenever possible wear comfortable shoes and by all the Gods, Old and New, make sure your costume is 'public bathroom' ready."

- CC4Causes.org

"Don't forget the most important thing. FUN. Have fun with it. Don't take yourself so seriously and don't compare yourself to everyone else. Just have fun with it and enjoy yourself."

- Jessica Huard

"The only difference between a novice and a master is time, patience, and education. Anyone can achieve this."

- Jessie Pridemore/Rufflebutt Cosplay

"Patience, young cosplayer, you will achieve your goals with time and patience, oh and super sharp scissors."

- Jedimanda

"Do it for yourself and yourself only."

- Sean Shaw





*"Don't get precious about your art, if it's not working throw it out and try again."*

- Rawrbomb

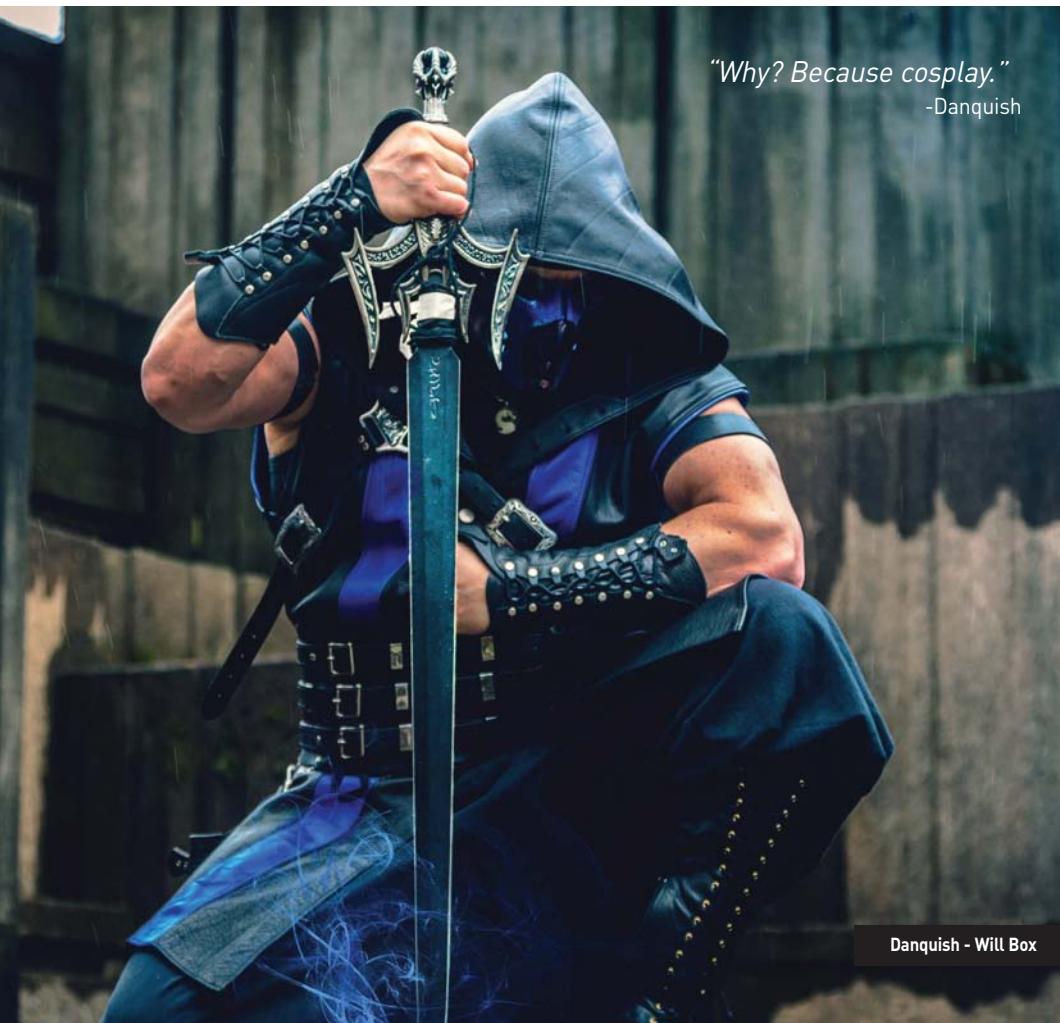


*"Don't strive to be the best, strive to always improve."*  
- Dekamexican Cosplay

Dexamexican - Houston is Photography



*"If something you're working on starts to frustrate you, take a break and breathe."*  
- Uncanny Megan



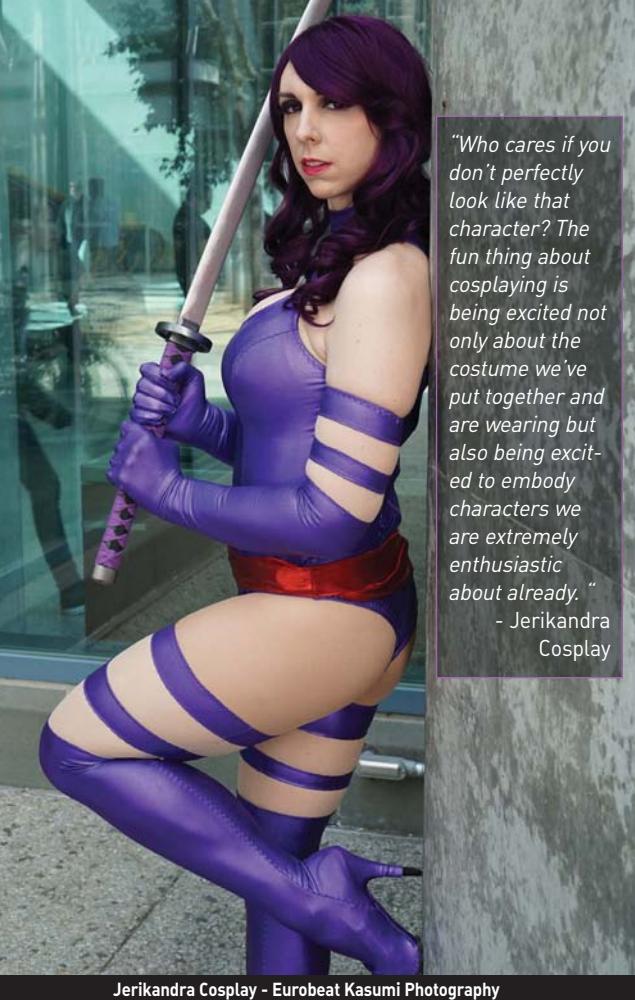
*"Why? Because cosplay."*

-Danquish



Chrissy Lynn Kyle - Manny Llanura

Danquish - Will Box



Jerikandra Cosplay - Eurobeat Kasumi Photography

*"Who cares if you don't perfectly look like that character? The fun thing about cosplaying is being excited not only about the costume we've put together and are wearing but also being excited to embody characters we are extremely enthusiastic about already."*

- Jerikandra Cosplay

*"If you're bullied online, like I was when I first started and was all through my school years, learn where the 'delete comment' button is or never go to that particular site again. You choose to be affected by negativity and read the negative comments. If you give into the power of the bully or troll, it continues to justify their actions and they will thrive, not only to hurt you, but to hurt anyone they can. Kill them with kindness, be positive and pro-active, because everybody and anybody can cosplay."*

- Joker's Harley



Harley's Joker & Joker's Harley - Harley's Joker

*"Cosplay is for everyone and that means anyone! Don't let people say you can't, when you can!"*

- Perzephone Cosplay



Perzephone Cosplay - N8Zim Photography

*"It's not how good or perfect your cosplay is. It doesn't matter if no one takes photos of your cosplay. Having fun and enjoying the moment with friends while cosplaying is what really matters!"*

- Asian Heritage Spidey

*"We all started somewhere and got better with practice."*

- Diana Nomster

*"Don't forget that cosplay should always be about having fun! Cosplay who you love, make friends and have fun, it will fuel your passion to cosplay for a long, long time."*

- YuffieBunny

*"Cosplay is not to be taken seriously. Otherwise call it coserious".*

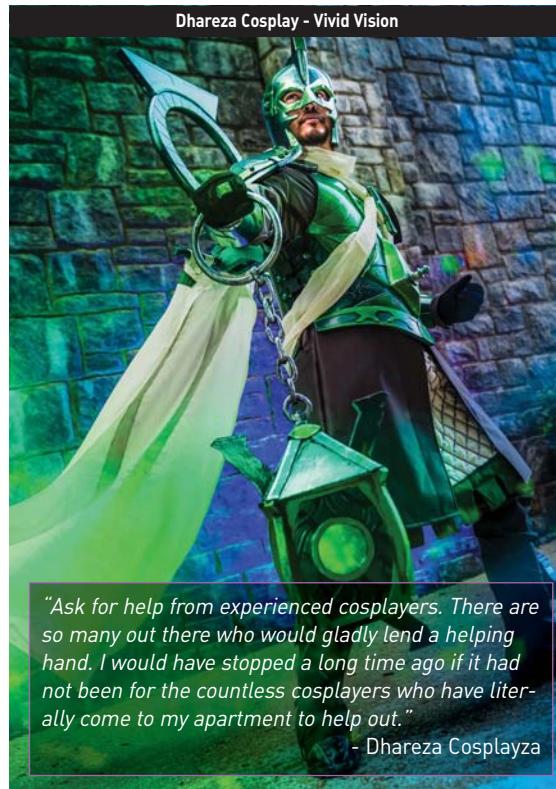
- Chrissy Lynn Kyle

*"Recreate characters you love and feel passionately about. It will show through both in how you convey the character and the care in details."*

- Lindze Merritt

*"Never let anyone put you or your work down. Bullies, haters, and negativity only have power if you allow them to. Just have fun and cosplay for YOU and no one else."*

- Jeanne Killjoy



*"Ask for help from experienced cosplayers. There are so many out there who would gladly lend a helping hand. I would have stopped a long time ago if it had not been for the countless cosplayers who have literally come to my apartment to help out."*

- Dhareza Cosplayza



*"Cosplay isn't about perceived fame, 'a career,' or who is prettier/sexiest/has more likes ... it's about celebrating a fandom, a love for being in a costume, and the friendships you form."*

- Alexa Heart

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Jedimanda - Alexandra Lee Studios



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*"Don't ever think a project is beyond your capability. There is no such thing as a formal education in cosplay, so everyone is learning as they go. You just have to buy some scrap materials and try different techniques in small scale before committing to an entire project. This is why I always try a new technique or material in every one of my builds so nothing is ever "old hat."*

- Bill Winans of Angry Dog Studios

*"You have control over your own destiny. Don't make excuses for why you're not getting shit done."*

- Stella Chuu

*"Don't let people make you feel ashamed about cosplay—everyone who wears a sports jersey is basically cosplaying.... It's not like they think they're Peyton Manning or something."*

- Justin Prince

*"Create things you love, for whatever reason you love them. Plan for the worst and always think positive. Remember that a community is here for you, just like you'll be there for others."*

- Abby Dark Star

*"Why live one life when you can live dozens! I love choosing characters with contrasting personality traits and that stem from magical lore because with cosplay you can become anything or anyone you'd like!"*

- Heather 1337

*"If you ain't having fun, you ain't doing it right. That goes for cosplay and life."*

- Real Life Peter Griffin

*"Before you get overwhelmed on a project, break down your cosplay build into smaller portions if it's a large, complicated build. Focus on the trees instead of the forest.'*

- Medieval Batman

*"Honing your makeup skills is very important! It can elevate your cosplay to the next level! So put your game face on! ↑w↓"*

- Vivid Vision



Lauren of Castle Corsetry - Joe Rubenstein



Riddle - WeNeals Photography

*"If you are just starting out, pick a character you love, feel a connection to, or has an attributes you wish you had. Because you will be investing your time and money into it."*

- Riddle

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# House of Anime

Tokyo's underpaid animators find a home thanks to crowdfunding.

Tetsuya Akutsu stands with his hands in his pockets, an embarrassed grin on his face.



"I haven't cleaned the place in a while," he explains.

In his defense, the place, a room on the second floor of a house in west Tokyo, isn't so much messy as it is ... empty. With just a futon, a few plastic drawers, and a desk, Akutsu's room could almost be featured on one of those minimalism websites.

But looks, as the saying goes, can be deceiving: for Akutsu, an animator who works on series like *Yokai Watch*, this spartan room made his career possible.

"If I hadn't been able to live here," he says, "I don't know what I would have done."

A native of Tochigi, about 80 miles north of Tokyo, Akutsu was inspired to become an animator after seeing *Digimon Adventure* in high school. He studied animation at a trade school in Tokyo and, after graduating, was hired to draw *douga*—in-between frames—the first step in the career of most Japanese animators.

Douga-men (so they're called, regardless of gender) make about ¥200 (\$2) per frame. New animators can manage about 200 to 300 frames a month, meaning they take in less than \$600. Not only is that less than a month's rent in west Tokyo, where most anime studios are centered, it's well below the city's minimum wage.

It may sound unbelievable, but making less than a part-timer at McDonald's is a very real scenario for many newbie animators in Japan's anime industry.

In 2013, Jun Sugawara decided to do something about it. A CG animator by trade, Sugawara, who saw his contemporaries in hand-drawn animation struggling, created a nonprofit to help young animators make ends meet. Initially, the NPO simply provided animators a monthly stipend.

"But," says Sugawara, "that wasn't very interesting."

Instead, he decided to

set up the dormitory, where animators could live close to Tokyo's hub of anime studios at low cost and, just as importantly, build a community of peers.

"Most animators only know the people who work at their studio," one animator tells me. "Here we can compare notes with people throughout the industry."

To fund the project, Sugawara used crowdfunding. Initially limited to Japanese backers, word of the project spread abroad thanks to director Sunao Katabuchi (*In This Corner of the World*) and North Carolina convention Animazement. Soon the project was receiving donations from America and all over the world.

The dorm opened in 2014 with two residents and has added two a year since; this year's additions will bring the total to eight. Potential dorm-dwellers apply via submitting a series of drawings.

Those drawings are judged by animator Shingo Yamashita, an animation star known for his work on *Naruto Shippuden* and *Twin Star Exorcists*. Yamashita is currently at work on an original anime about a girl who transforms into a castle when she's angry that, if successful, will provide the dorms another boost.

Akutsu, along with animator Masaaki Tanaka, who works at *Attack on Titan*'s Wit Studio, caught Yamashita's eye, becoming the dorm's first two residents. At the time, when the project was in its infancy, they had to share a single room. Still, they knew they had it good compared to their peers.

"Everyone who joined my studio at the same time as I did ended up quitting," says Akutsu.

"It's not necessarily the people with talent who stay," adds Tanaka, "it's the people with money."

Why are wages for animators so low in the first place? It's a complicated question, explain animators and supporters gathered at the dorm, where they meet for a group meal once a month. For one, *douga* artists share a problem with factory workers in Detroit and miners in coal country: globalization. Studios can pay animators in



Korea and China a fraction of the cost (and, Tanaka predicts, one day they'll even be supplanted by A.I.).

Another factor, explains Sugawara, is that even veteran animators don't make so much money. Or, as he puts it, "The bottom is cheap because the top is cheap." Unlike manga artists, animators aren't paid residuals, meaning even if an anime series is a huge hit, that money doesn't come back to the animators. Most modern anime is funded by so-called production committees, in which anime studios, record labels, game companies, and other merchandisers each share a slice of the risk. If an anime bombs, everyone is insulated, but if it's a hit, the studio itself only reaps a small bit of the reward.

Still, those at the dorm admit, some of the blame rests on the animators themselves.

"New animators don't ask how much they'll be making before they enter a studio," says Akutsu. "That's their own fault."

"There's been talk about forming a union for a long time," adds Sugawara, "but it hasn't really worked out."

But as this group of young animators sit together, swapping stories and planning their own original projects, it feels like the power to change the industry might well lie in this west Tokyo dorm.



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## WHAT IS **TAMASHII NATIONS®**?

TAMASHII NATIONS is a fusion of the top Japanese figure brands from Japan, such as the highly popular articulated series S.H.Figuarts. TAMASHII means soul in Japanese and the brand is built from the creative DNA in our "souls" and powered by a passion to create cool, fun, and amazing product. After almost a decade since the brand's inception, TAMASHII NATIONS is quickly becoming a sensation in the collector world. To celebrate our upcoming 10th anniversary, we are bringing TAMASHII NATIONS, and many of your favorite anime characters, to fans in a first ever world-wide tour! We hope to see you in New York this April.



STAY UP TO DATE ON NEW PRODUCT LAUNCHES, EVENTS, AND MORE!  
Follow us on Instagram @instTamashii to see what's coming next!

Check here for info. on event exclusives:

**TAMASHII WORLD TOUR**

<https://tamashii.jp/special/tour/>



\*Please note that this event features product intended for those ages 15 and up. \*The products pictured in this ad are prototypes and may differ from the final product.