

## **Reviews Made for MyAnimeList (Revised) DDM55**

### **Vagabond – Manga Review**

It is very rarely you find a piece of art like this where every aspect is done at such a high level that there is not much needed to be said. In terms of manga, I have only seen a few other series that do it to the same level as Vagabond and even then, I believe Vagabond stands at the top. Takehiko Inoue is a master at work, his art is second to none, his character writing is matched by few, and his storytelling is wonderful.

The only flaw you could give is that the series does not have a definitive end and there has not been a single chapter released in the past eight years, but even then, it is not too large a flaw. Anyone who has read Vagabond knows that where we left off is quite satisfactory, of course I would love for Inoue to come back and finish the series but I do not think it is absolutely necessary there is also the final exhibition chapter he published which shows the end of Musashi's journey. Where the characters have been left off, especially our main characters Musashi and Kojirō for which we have seen plenty of content for, we can be happy where the manga has left their stories.

To go back to the art, you see why this series as a manga is so vital because of the visual storytelling that Inoue does. Since having originally written this review, I have read the book on which this manga is based off of, Eiji Yoshikawa's "Musashi" a fictional telling of the real-life swordsman, Musashi Miyamoto. The book is wonderful, written as a grand romantic adventure, showing the journey from when Musashi first becomes a swordsman to his famous duel with Sasaki Kojirō. The book is an epic journey of discovery and adventure, but it is a product of its time. The novel was originally written in the 1930s, and in some ways that is very evident. The book has an interesting style of telling the story, where they will switch the POV character within a single paragraph, sometimes making it confusing. The book is more about the adventure and the grandness of being a samurai, and while there are very introspective, philosophical, and well written characters and plots, it does not quite compare to the manga.

Inoue takes Yoshikawa's story, and decides to focus more upon the characters and themes, and the development of those aspects of the story. The plot and character development follow the same blueprint, but Inoue takes certain aspects of the original story and changes them as he sees fit, for example, the highly acclaimed "farm-arc." This story arc is as stated, it takes place on a farm, and has the most fulfilling character develop in the entire series. The original novel does have an arc on a farm, but it is almost an afterthought, just a place for Musashi to rest and train, but in the manga, he goes there to find meaning, the meaning of his life, the meaning of strength, not perceived strength, but true strength, which could be seen as the overarching theme of the entire story.

I do not wish to go into extensive details about this arc, especially it is the last one to have been completed, but I will say, that it may one, if not the greatest story arc I have read in a piece of fiction, almost like the whole series was building up towards it, and just because this is the arc I am highlighting, I promise that the entire series is worth it, and for those of you who really want to see the end after reading it, the book isn't too bad, in fact it is really good, it is just different, and doesn't quite match up to the adaptation.

## Analysis

The above was a review, going over simple things about the series, why it is good, what makes it good, comparisons to the original novel, and whether it was worth reading, as it says above, it is. I mentioned some of the characters and themes that the story goes over. For those who haven't read the series or the book, **SPOILERS** ahead. This analysis will focus on the manga as opposed to the book because that is what I believe to be the superior version of the story, but also the one I have read many more times, and have a better understanding of.

## Characters and Themes

I will add more analysis of certain characters as I write them out, and I could talk about just about any character, no matter how minor, but for now, this is what I have.

### Musashi Miyamoto

I feel that there is not much that I can say that has not been said by others. There are so many posts, videos, and reviews that go over why this character is so great, and what makes him so great, but I will go over why anyways. The story starts with a boy in a field after a major battle, a boy named Shinmen Takezō, who later becomes Musashi Miyamoto.

At the start of the story, Musashi is arrogant, angry, and desperate to prove himself as the “strongest under the sun” and be a strong swordsman like his father. Through the love and affection of Otsu, and the guidance of Takuan, Musashi starts his road to enlightenment and his journey as a swordsman. Unlike the novel, Musashi initially is still rash, angry, like a beast, and it takes time for him to change. He will become more mature and less aggressive, but then in the heat of battle he will be like a beast. He will fight a man, beat him, and not understand why his enemy asked for help for the sake of someone else, but will then think of Otsu and be on the verge of tears.

He is complex, even from the beginning, on the surface, he is a beast who is becoming slightly less animalistic, but he will then engage in a fight that is unnecessary. When a conflict that was earlier in the story starts again, he ends up in a massive battle that ends with being proclaimed to be “Invincible”, he did it, but when he thinks about it, he realizes that he had wasted the last 22 years of his life, trying to be “Invincible” but he realizes something, it's just a word, it doesn't actually mean anything.

He goes on a journey alone to just learn about himself, and how he can be strong, and this is how he eventually ends up in a farming village. He starts to live with the people helping through the famine, but not because he knows how to farm, but because he is determined and physically strong. He has to learn how to farm, how he doesn't pay attention to the weak things around him, he steps on them and doesn't even realize, he is too invested in himself. The man who is the strongest in the nation could only become strong by becoming kind, not because he can cut down all those in front of him. This is not to say that he will never duel again, but he will never needlessly take a life, like he has so often done in the series.

This is the true start of the man we see in the current story, the man who is kind, compassionate, and truly strong. I understand that I went over the story very quickly, but at this moment I am writing a full analysis of this character and it will require me to re-read the story.

### **Sasaki Kojirō**

This character is interesting in so many ways, for so many reasons. To start, is the difference between him and his book counterpart, and that being that in the manga, Kojirō is deaf. This is a big change, as having a famous swordsman who will eventually duel the protagonist is odd. In the novel he is not deaf, he is a man with a silver tongue, he is arrogant, vain, narcissistic and described as being truly evil.

In the novel, Kojirō is a swordsman for fame and glory, he wants to be famous, he criticizes everyone who is not himself, claiming their accomplishments are not that impressive and that he could easily do that, he fights because of his ego, in the manga that is not true at all.

In the manga, he fights because that's all he knows. He was raised by a samurai who was his father's teacher, and after washing ashore after the death of his family with only a singular sword. The boy carries the sword everywhere, and the man who raises him spends his time training with the sword, Kojirō only knows the sword, that is it, so he can only live by the sword.

In the book, him and Musashi hate each other, they cannot stand each other and butt heads to the end of the novel where they duel, in the manga it is different. While the story will have them duel each other, it is not out of hate, but that they both live by the sword. Musashi is one of the only people who can truly understand Kojirō, and who he can find companionship, even when he goes to be a sword teacher for the Shogun, he just gets annoyed and wishes to see Musashi. Musashi spends a lot of his time reflecting, thinking of Kojirō, wondering how he could be more like him, how Kojirō is like water, he flows, and takes whatever shape he needs, while Musashi finds himself being rigid so often.

The manga will not end the way the novel did, these two will not fight each other out of hate, but out of companionship, that they are two men who live by the sword.

### **Honiden Matahachi**

Matahachi is the character that we originally meet with Musashi, or as Matahachi knows him, Takezō. At first the story makes you like Matahachi, he seems kind, loyal to his friend, he has a fiancé that he and Takezō grew up with, Otsu. As the two are recovering from injuries with a mother and daughter, things start to get twisted and causes a falling out between the two friends. As Takezō becomes Musashi and rises up in fame and skill, Matahachi starts to have a downward spiral. He had left his fiancé and mother, marrying the mother who helped the two during injuries, and while living with her, he becomes lazy, spending his time drinking and lazing around, while his wife runs a brothel, doesn't respect him, and after a while they kick him out of the house.

He is kicked out after an incident where he burned down the dojo that Musashi was challenging, and becomes a criminal in the city he lived in. Through events involving a wandering samurai, he takes the identity of Sasaki Kojirō, thinking that the man is dead (he's not, it was someone who was looking to deliver a letter to him), and he goes around claiming to be this great swordsman, using a letter as a claim to his new identity. At first, we think that maybe he and Musashi will meet at the top, as two great swordsmen, but Matahachi becomes more pathetic, he causes problems for everyone, constantly lies, never gets past being a coward, and ruins all the relationships around him.

It is only when Musashi reaches the top, becomes Invincible, and is everything that he wanted to be (although he realizes it is not worth it), is when he starts to reflect on how pathetic he is. Matahachi is not about a boy who falls to the bottom and rises to the top, he fell and realized he wasn't anyone special, he is a story of an ordinary man who wanted to be special, but

never actually put an effort in to be special. He constantly messed up everything around him, and it is only when he realizes this, is that he starts to become better. He still has times that he goes into lying, or bad-mouths people that are supposed to be important to him, but he is slowly changing into a more honest, kinder, better person.

### **Key Story Moments**

As I re-read the story again, I will do analysis of certain chapters, but for those who read manga, you will understand how sometimes certain chapters mesh, and you can be unsure of which moment is from which chapter.

### **Chapter 21**

This is the first major turning point for the story and Musashi's character, this is when he becomes Musashi, shedding the name Takezō, and the hatred that came with it after being captured and strung in a tree by Takuan, he is taken to a place to die by Takuan. Takuan tells him to rejoice, he is dying, he has chosen a place, to die, that should mean he has no regrets, right? Takuan hits, and asks him to be happy, but Takazō just asks to be killed, but Takuan says that when you go to death you should be happy, so why won't he smile while constantly hitting him. When Takuan has to sit out of fatigue, Takazo starts smashing his head against a boulder, asking himself why he was born, if he was only going to be shunned and hated and judged, he should just die, to which Takuan stops him, crushing his hand in the process. He asks Takezō if a life full of hate, and anger, and rage was a life worth living, no, no it isn't, that isn't the life for him. Takezō, with Takuan holding his bleeding, smashed forehead, starts to cry, and asks if it is true, does he deserve to live? From this Takuan names him Musashi Miyamoto, reminding him that there is no light if one does not know darkness, to live on and endure in the shadows, and if he endures, light will find its way to him, as Otsu runs happily towards him, calling out his name. this is the start of the story, with the first 21 chapter being setup for the true story. I think about this chapter constantly, not just as a fan, but also as a writer, and I hope to be able to write a fraction as well as this one chapter is written.

### **Chapter 294**

I just get emotional at any scene where Musashi cries, as seen in chapter 21, and there are a few other scenes, but this one is the one that hits home the hardest. Musashi has been wondering for a while, and after ending up in the care of a family living in a hut, he stays around for a while just living with them. He is there when one of the children dies, and when a new one is born, he lives with them, eats with them, but he is going by his old name, for his new name is famous for having killed 70 men in a duel by himself, and while he has the reputation he once yearned for, but now it feels meaningless, pointless, he is not anything good. When he tells the family who he is they are shocked, in part because this famous man has been living with them for over a year, but also because he is not what they thought he would be. They say he is kind; he looks like a man who feels guilty, and that he can start a new life, settle down, but he says he can't, he thanks them and leaves. As he walks away the young sons run after him asking him to come back, to them the sword, and say to promise to come back some day and teach them then. We see his back, he is leaving without a single word, but when we see his face, he is crying, he is truly sad. He says to himself how he thought his days of wandering were over, how he had left the "spiral of death" but his inner ego says they are strong and they can still cut someone down, he thinks of Otsu, her being the only person who could take him off his path. This chapter is what leads him

to the farm, which leads to the greatest changes in Musashi as man and the road to becoming the better person the family claimed he was and could be. This chapter is pivotal to Musashi finally changing into the strong kind person the story had been building him up to be.

### **Why this Story means so much to me**

If you the moments section above, you will see why I love this story, how it means so much to me, how the journey of this violent killer is so profound and thought provoking. When I first read it, it was not my favourite manga, not even in the top 5 or possibly even 10. Then I read it again and again and again, and then when I was about to read it for the 5<sup>th</sup> time, I had a realization.

Why do I keep reading this story? and when I thought about it, and really thought about the characters and the themes, and all of what made the story, I realized it was not only one of my favourite manga, it was simply one of my favourite pieces of fiction. I decided not to read it for the 5<sup>th</sup> time, waiting to buy it physically before I would do that, which I have mostly done, but damn it, they are out of stock.

After realizing how much I loved it, I decided to pick up the original novel, and while I do not love it nearly as much as the manga, it was a really good book. This made me want to read more Japanese books, and while I have only read one book since then, I have plenty more I plan to read.

I also decided that I wanted to read Inoue's other manga, and started with his most famous work, Slam Dunk, a series about high school basketball, and it is also incredible, although different in many ways. He has a third series that I am saving for a rainy day, when I want to read something, I know I will like. This manga seems to be an in-between of the other two. Being about wheelchair basketball, but having similar themes to Vagabond.