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Vs The World: *Scott Pilgrim* In Context

The *Scott Pilgrim* series consists of six volumes written and illustrated by Canadian author Bryan Lee O’Malley. The series chronicles the life of the titular character Scott Pilgrim, an unemployed 23 year old living in outskirts of Toronto and attempting to make it big with his band. He then meets Ramona Flowers and falls in love, but learns that in order to date her he must defeat her seven evil exes. The series combines the “slice of life” genre with superhero sensibilities, creating a world that is both relatable to people in their late teens and 20s who are going through or about to go through what the characters are experiencing in the normal aspects of their lives, and appealing to fans of the superhero genre. *Scott Pilgrim* draws the culture of the early 2000s, producing a work that is aesthetically diverse in its influences, with a strong social commentary on individual struggles and the way its readership interprets the world.

From a cultural standpoint, *Scott Pilgrim* is a work heavily influenced by video games and their history, containing a massive amount of subtle and not-so-subtle references to various games and important figures. Characters are introduced with tags indicating their statistics, such as, “Scott Pilgrim. 23 years old. Rating: Awesome” or “Wallace Wells. Roommate. 25 years old. Rating: 7.5/10” (O’Malley). Upon defeating members of the League of Evil Exes, Scott is awarded various “upgrades” to his (moral) character, even coming across an extra life at one

point. These upgrades also happen after Scott makes important life choices—following his declaration of love for Ramona he receives 9999 experience points and proceeds to level up, obtaining stat boosts to various characteristics, such as “guts” and “heart.” He also earns The Power of Love, a sword that allows him to defeat Ramona’s fourth evil ex. These power ups are all standard video game conventions today, and inspired the progression of the overarching plot, with each book marked by a “boss battle” with one of Ramona’s evil exes.

The art style of the *Scott Pilgrim* is very cartoony and manga-inspired. While part of this may come from the fact that O’Malley did not have the budget to produce an in-color comic, leading him to “[embrace] the B&W manga aesthetic” (O’Malley), it would certainly be wrong to say that it was the only reason O’Malley called on conventions of manga to produce his series. The influence of manga is clearly evident, not only in O’Malley’s art style, but also in the story structure of *Scott Pilgrim* as a whole. According to *Faster Than A Speeding Bullet* author Stephen Weiner, “Manga, which had been growing in popularity in the 1990s, reached new heights by late 2004. Part of the appeal of Manga was that almost every conceivable kind of story was told” (Weiner 61-2). With a larger market of people looking for translated manga, more and more works were being brought to American audiences. One such comic was *Even A Monkey Can Draw Manga*, described as, “a satirical series by Kentaro Takekuma and Koji Aihara that parodied both the conventions of mainstream manga and the Japanese comic book industry itself” (Hudson). Though it was a parody, the book exposed O’Malley to the wide variety of genres present in Japanese comics, which was refreshing when contrasted with the American industry dominated by superheroes. In particular O’Malley was interested in writing a shonen inspired story, a name that denotes “a genre of Japanese comics aimed primarily at a

young male audience and typically characterized by an emphasis on action-filled plots" (OED).

Because of the rise in popularity of manga in the early 2000s, O'Malley was able to develop a comic that combined the aesthetic influences of Japanese comics with his own personal style, as well as integrated conventions of manga with those of American comics.

As with all comic books, strips, and graphic novels, the structure of each page and the panels within it is one of an illustrator's most important tools in conveying aspects of the story, from indicating a flashback to setting the tone of a specific page. O'Malley has a firm grasp on the principals of comic paneling, using unique structures to draw attention to important moments in the story. For example, in a page near the end of volume one, *Scott Pilgrim's Precious Little Life*, Ramona begins to tell the story of her relationship with Matthew Patel, her first evil ex who she started dating in the seventh grade (see fig. 1). The background of the panels becomes black, indicating a flashback, and the art style becomes sketchy and childishly simplistic, giving a sense of the time period in which it takes place as well as the way Ramona personally remembers the events to be very juvenile. She is drawn leaning on the panels beneath her as if looking down at her own memories, when in fact in the present she is sitting on a balcony above Scott as she tells him the story, resting her arms on the railing which is replaced by the panels on the page. This provides a seamless transition from the current events of the story and standard art style to the shift in time, place, and illustration, turning what could have been an abrupt and confusing conversion into one that is graceful and aesthetically pleasing.

O'Malley is also adept at structuring his panels in a way that can set a different tone for the work. In volume two, *Scott Pilgrim vs The World*, Scott gets an unexpected phone call from Envy Adams, his former girlfriend (see fig 2). While his facial expression makes it clear that this

is not a conversation he wants to be having, the rigid structure of the panels, which continues for the next four pages, visually creates the sensation of the tension between the two characters. Only a page before this the panels were open and varied, changing from page to page as Scott goes through life. When Scott recognizes Envy by her voice alone, all of the relaxed paneling the reader has grown to take for granted before this point is tossed aside, and Scott is placed into clearly defined and uniform boxes. His feelings of being suddenly trapped by his ex-girlfriend come across in the uncomfortable closeups of each panel and the way they are too small to show even his entire face in. The fact that the phone Envy's voice is coming from is at the center of four out of the five panels in which Scott's face can be seen also emphasizes her importance in the moment. Her face as she speaks is never shown, but the phone is given precedent over Scott on this page. The panic in Scott's eyes is contrasted by the picture of himself and Envy from their past together. In it they are both smiling, with Scott looking at her adoringly. When placed aside the image of Scott's scribble-lined eyes in the second to last panel, the reader gets a sense of just how far apart these two characters have drifted and how much of an impact their breakup had on Scott. The contrast of an image from their happy past being the first visual picture the reader has of Envy and the first dialog the reader sees from her having such a negative effect on Scott reveal the complexities of her character and the changes her character has gone through in only a single page and a few words.

Scott Pilgrim also employs character design in order to move the reader through the story. One of the most obvious examples of this technique occurs at the end of volume four, *Scott Pilgrim Gets It Together* (see fig. 5). Scott and Ramona have both said the dreaded "L" word for the first time to one another and found their feelings to be reciprocated. Ramona swoops in for a

kiss and embraces Scott. This moment takes place directly after his battle with her fourth evil ex, with the setting being nighttime in her backyard. The first two panels on the page set up and establish the kiss. In the third panel Ramona and Scott are still kissing, but from the change in Ramona's outfit it is obvious that some time has passed since the previous panels. Instead of the short sleeved shirt she was wearing during the nighttime kiss, she now has on a hooded sweatshirt and is wearing a pair of sunglasses. In a black and white comic that shifts between backgrounds in either color, the white of the buildings would not necessarily be enough to differentiate these as two distinct time periods. However, by dressing Ramona in an alternate outfit O'Malley is able to convey the passage of time in a way that would be impossible if the characters were all limited to one outfit or costume, as in many American superhero comics. Not only does O'Malley's transition switch settings in the span of one page, but it also gives the impression that the two characters have been this way since the establishing kiss—unable to let one another go. The plea that the two "get a room" is also indicative of this, though the structure of the page makes it appear as though they have been making out this entire time, rather than sharing a quick kiss in front of their friends.

Another advantage of drawing characters with entire wardrobes rather than just one suit and cape is the characterization these outfits can provide. Because of the cartoonish style, many of the characters appear similar to one another. One way in which O'Malley differentiates his characters is through their clothing and individual senses of style. In the case of Knives Chau, the high school girl Scott is dating at the start of the series, her clothing reflects her development throughout the story. She goes from being a stereotypical "schoolgirl" in volume one (see fig. 7) to being inspired by Ramona's outfits and donning more complex getups, even going so far as to

dye a portion of her hair in an effort to win Scott back (fig. 8). In the end Knives stops attempting to emulate Ramona's look and develops a style of her own, signifying the way she gets over her relationship with Scott and moves on with her life. Ramona is, of course, the female lead of the series and is thus given a great deal of attention, especially concerning her wardrobe. In figure 6, Ramona is shown with all of her "past" selves, drawn in almost every outfit she has worn throughout the series. Though her hair styles change and the clothes do not remain the same, her personal style stays consistent. She almost always is wearing some type of jacket and a dress or a skirt of some sort, typically accompanied by a pair of tights or leggings. Likewise, the other characters in the series have similarly consistent looks. Scott's wardrobe is made up entirely of t-shirts referencing various bands and video games, but the only reoccurring shirt is one bearing a heart with SP in the center; a Smashing Pumpkins tee he seems to favor for sharing his initials. O'Malley uses clothing and individual styles to his advantage, allowing for unique ways of structuring his panels and an even deeper insight into the minds, personalities, and the development of his characters.

Ramona's outfits and ever-changing hairstyles, while in many ways defining her character, have also caused many to question whether or not she embodies the idea of the dreaded "manic pixie dream girl." New York Times writer Matteson Perry describes the trope, saying, "Though often perky, the Manic Pixie Dream Girl will be troubled as well. She straddles the narrow line between quirky and crazy, mysterious and strange, sexy and slutty; she is perfectly imperfect. And that imperfection is the key, because a Manic Pixie Dream Girl must be messed up enough to need saving, so the powerless guy can do something heroic in the third act" (Perry). While Ramona's first appearance literally occurs in Scott's dreams and she is initially

described only as a cool American delivery girl, later revealed to have a whole cast of exes for Scott to heroically defeat, what makes her character so great is that she defies convention and undergoes an entire character arc of her own. Because the story is told from Scott's, at some points extremely unreliable, perspective, Ramona's development isn't wholly apparent until later in the series when the reader learns the whole truth about her admittedly mysterious past. However, Scott's battles with her exes aren't just plot points used to make him look cool—they serve as the catalysts for the greater part of Ramona's self discovery and the way she comes to terms with her past. In the end, Ramona and Scott face Gideon, Ramona's 7th evil ex, together, both having grown from their relationship with one another. Over the course of this relationship, Ramona calls Scott out on the way he cheated on her allowing him to finally understand that he is not just a hapless victim but has wronged people just as much, if not more than, he has been wronged himself. And when Scott tells Ramona that he is trying to be a better person and change for her, it helps her come to terms with the fact that she needs to do the same and stop running away from her problems and the people who care about her. In the end Scott wields The Power of Understanding, while Ramona possesses The Power of Love, the two swords symbolic of their individual growth. Together they defeat Gideon, and are finally able to enter into a relationship complete with trust and honesty. Ramona subverts the idea of the “manic pixie dream girl” in that she is not a plot device to help Scott through his journey. She is a fully developed character in her own right, who saves both herself and Scott and doesn't wait around for the men in her life to fix all of her problems.

The series is also very self-aware of the fact that is a comic, drawing influence from the history of American comics in order to convey its social implications. The story itself

incorporates the idea of a superhero in a way that combines the “secret identity” with the super alter-ego. In the 1960s Marvel comics adopted a new approach to superhero comics. Author Stephen Weiner explains the decision, saying, “[Stan Lee] decided that the new Marvel heroes would be as closely grounded in the real world as it was possible for costumed superheroes to be. This meant that these heroes would experience the problems everyday people face as well as the problems that went with battling super-villains” (Weiner 10). This new direction proved to be a massive success for Marvel, leading to the creation of some of the company’s most successful characters. In *Scott Pilgrim*, however, real life problems are the *same* as “super” problems, unlike Spider-Man whose troubles as Peter Parker are vastly different from those he experiences as Spider-Man. By eliminating the superhero persona and having the characters as they are face battles against killer robots and psychic vegan-powered bad guys, O’Malley is making a statement about how our very human problems can often feel like these great heroic struggles.

The series’ connection to video games is instrumental in illustrating this idea. Stephen Stills, the lead singer and guitarist in Scott’s band, suggests that Scott take the open job at the restaurant he works at. He says, “We actually have a dishwashing position open. You do that, I could teach you prep on the side. You could work your way up.” To which Scott responds, “So it’s more or less like a video game, you’re saying? Kind of a ‘job system’?” (O’Malley). Even though Scott gets a literal slap in the face for making such a backwards comparison, his question is indicative of the way he sees the world. His character would have grown up with video games, such as *The Legend of Zelda* and *Super Mario Bros.*, and continues to play them in the present day of the story, much like a majority of comic book fans and certainly readers of this particular series, as well as O’Malley himself. Scott might look like an idiot when comparing the ‘job

systems' in video games to jobs in real life, but for much of the *Scott Pilgrim* readership passing thoughts such as these are not uncommon or totally laughable. O'Malley validates this when, after Scott gets the job, he is rewarded with five hundred experience points. An important moment in his life is equated to the growth that one would acquire from completing a difficult task in a video game, successfully proving that the situation *is* "more or less a video game." The visuals depicting Scott leveling up and advancing are material images of immaterial progress—there's no flashing lights and LEVEL UP signs when regular people in the real world better themselves, but over time one can look back to the past and see just how much growing up they've done. Individually we all gain experience points and become better, stronger people for it.

While his experience with work reveals life to be something of a video game, Scott's battle against Ramona's evil exes has the opposite idea. The former situation mimics the idea of life imitating art (in this case, games), whereas the latter is art imitating life. If Scott copes with his mundane experiences with video game analogies, then his dealings with the League of Evil Exes are how the audience understands his relationship with Ramona. Really, the premise of the series—that the only way the characters can be together is if they defeat Ramon's exes, the literal demons of her past—is just an exaggerated version of what regular everyday people go through when trying to make a relationship work. It isn't always easy, and often it can feel like a battle against the world. By relating his characters' lives and struggles to the progression of a video game, O'Malley encourages his readers to continue pushing themselves to get that next high score. We don't all have a final boss to face, but everyone has hurdles in their lives they must overcome in order to better themselves. At its heart, *Scott Pilgrim* isn't about all the flashy fight

sequences and trying to fit in as many pop culture references as possible; it's about the relationships between the characters, and how they come out on the other side of their battles, both big and small, having learned something and become better for it.

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Fig 1. Ramona recalls her 7th grade relationship with Matthew Patel in Volume 1.

Fig 2. Scott unexpectedly gets a call from *his* evil ex in Volume 2.

Fig 3. Scott earns the power of love at the climax of Volume 4.

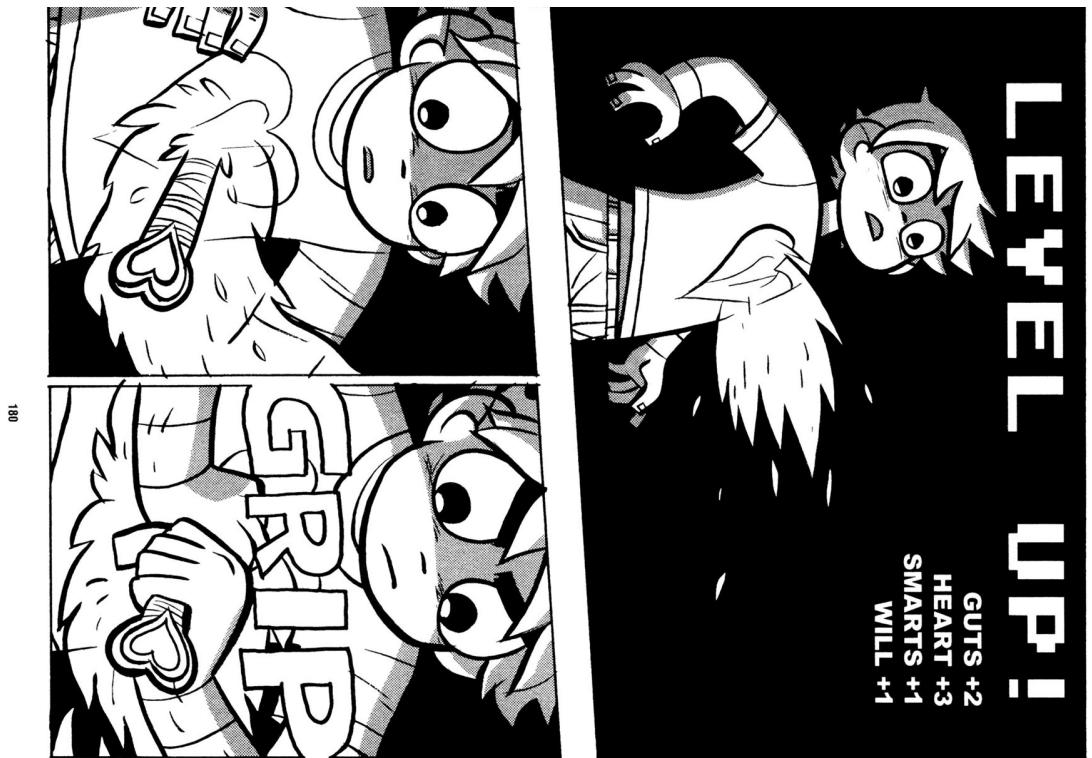




Fig 4. Scott and the gang are all gathered together for a celebratory dinner at the end of Volume 4.

Fig 5. Scott and Ramona share a kiss after mutually declaring their love for one another in Volume 4.

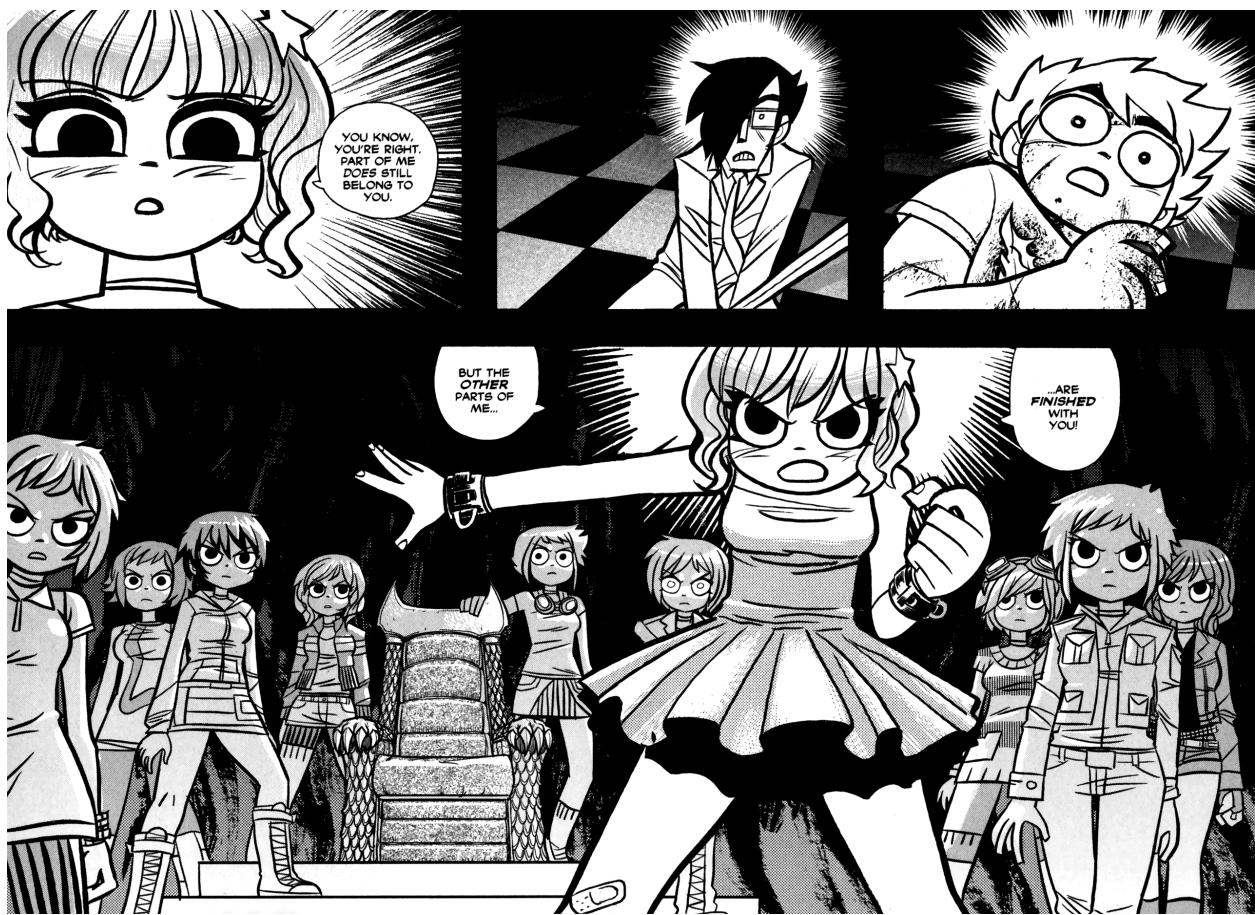
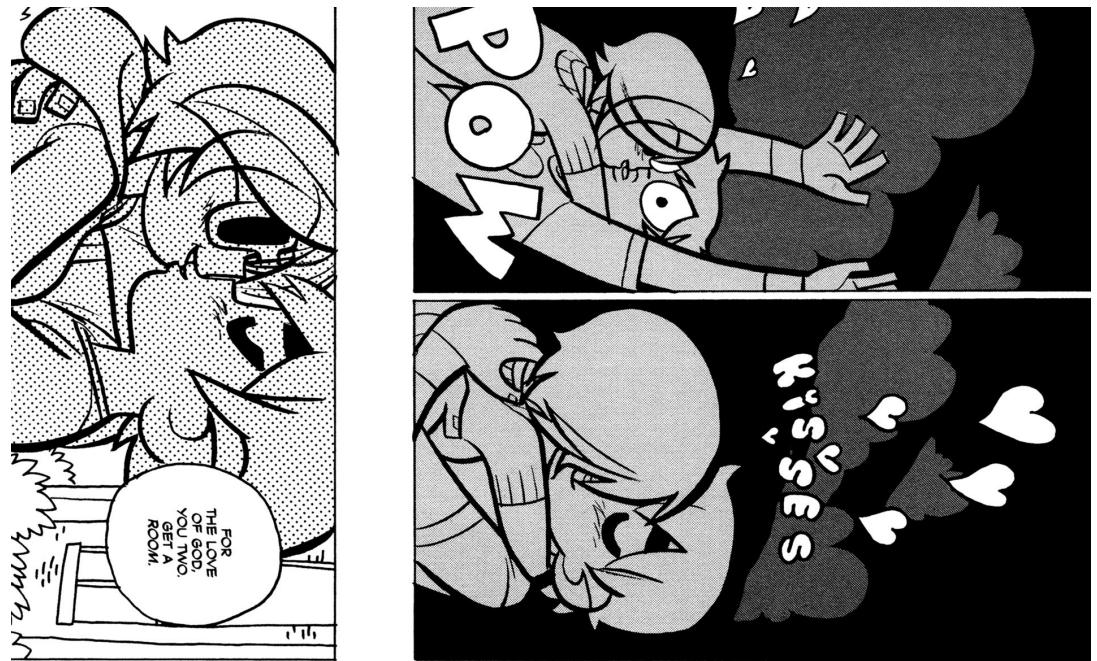


Fig 6. Ramona fights back against her final evil ex in Volume 6.

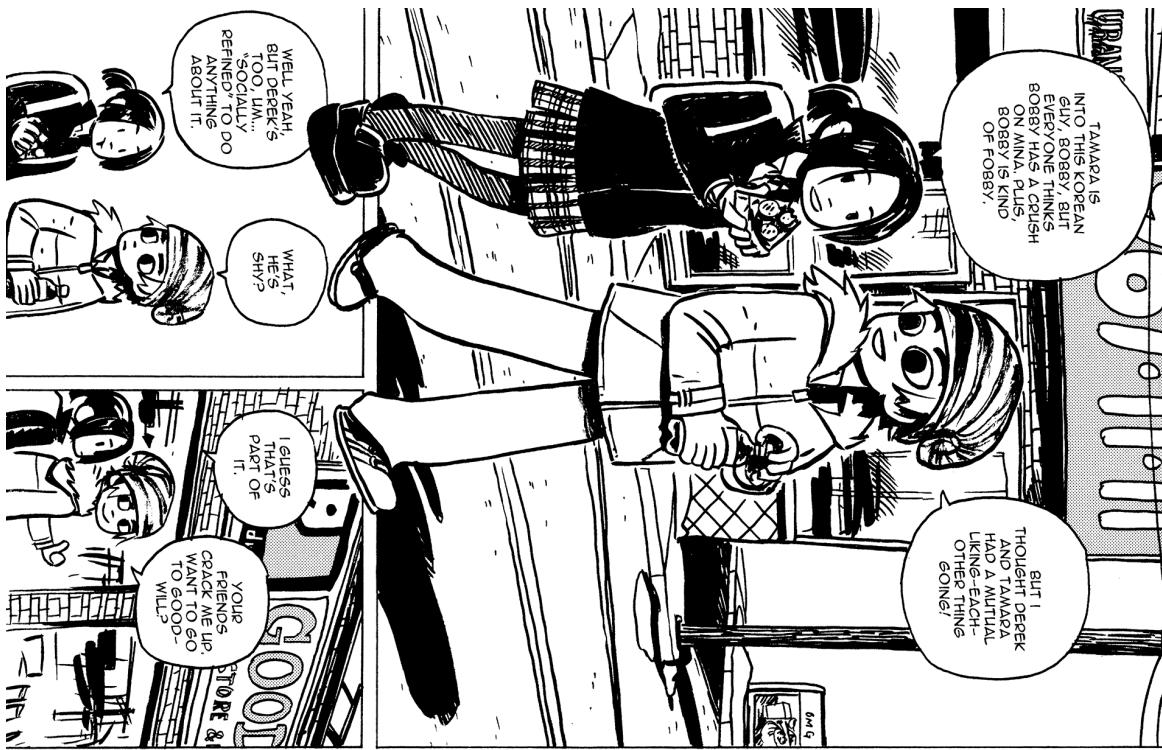


Fig 7. Knives and Scott gossip about her high school drama in Volume 1.

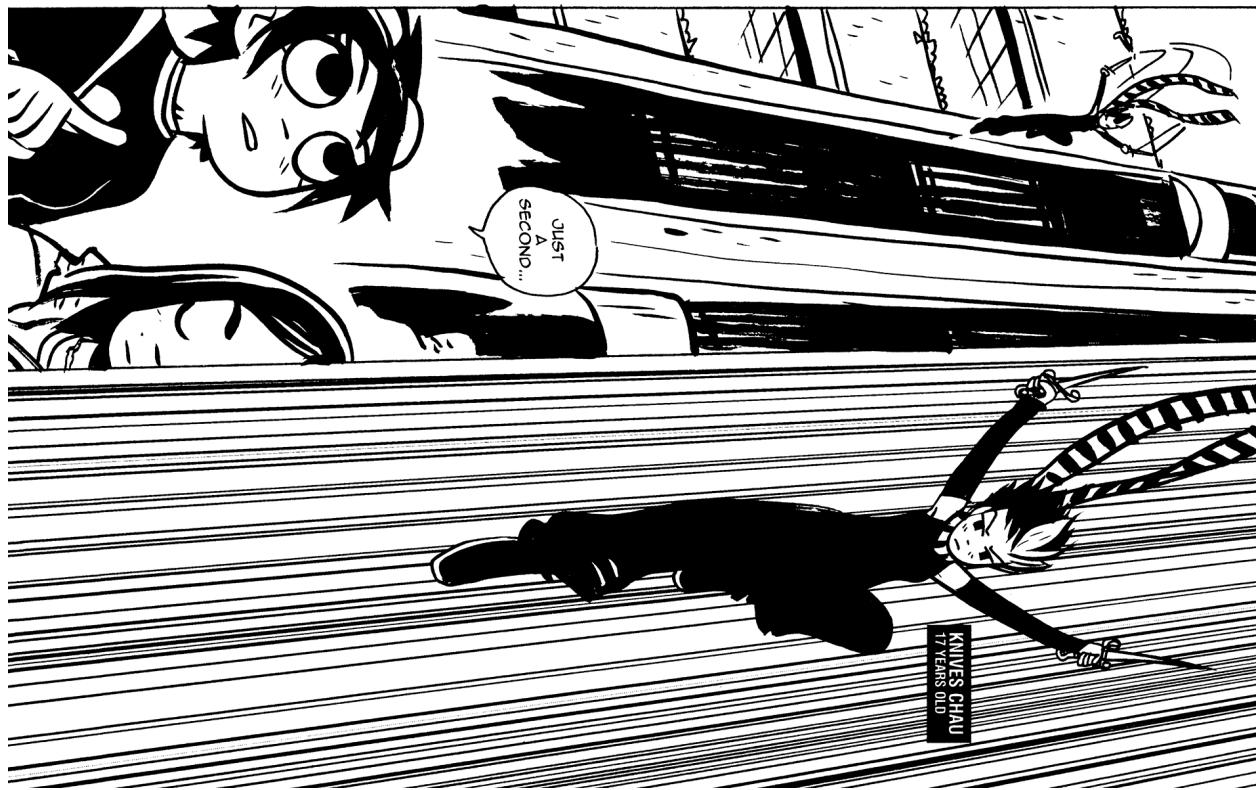


Fig 8. Knives is about to initiate a fight with Ramona for Scott's love in Volume 2.