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In his first new graphic novel since 2001's acclaimed *Mail Order Bride*, Mark Kalesniko delivers a 416-page *tour de force* chronicling a single day—a few hours, even—in the life of his recurring dog-headed alter ego, Alex Kalienka.

Stuck in a horrendous traffic jam on his way to his increasingly miserable job as an animator at Babbitt Jones Studios, a burnt-out and depressed Alex alternately rages, reminisces, fantasizes and hallucinates. Thus flashbacks to his earliest days as a starry-eyed young animator snagging his dream job, through the increasingly depressing political battles and creative compromises, with a love affair gone badly wrong along the way, alternate with scenes of an increasingly agitated present-day Alex, who imagines a series of increasingly violent deaths for himself.

Then again, are they in fact fantasies, or prescient flashes? Is a threatening car tailing Alex just a paranoid fantasy or a genuine threat? Readers will have to wait until the very end of this hugely ambitious graphic novel to find out.

Moreover, woven into this narrative fabric is a series of imagined moments from two generations ago, a Golden Age of animation, when an earlier Alex made his entry into a much different Babbitt Jones Studio—as imagined by the increasingly despondent present-day Alex.

Loaded with fascinating insider information on two different generations of animators, skipping seamlessly among present and several different pasts, reality and fantasy, *Freeway* is another step forward for a major cartooning talent.

Freeway Details

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John says

Simply amazing. Kalesniko indulges in lots of long silent sequences that revel in the beauty of Los Angeles, past and present. But his real gifts are telling a wildly complicated nonlinear story about an animator haunted by the contrast of more innocent times, beautiful women who got away, and a broke-down nemesis with too much misplaced rage. The story flashes back and forth with only the slightest (but sufficient) clues as to the when and the why of the transition. A staggering critique of modern animation, a tragic comedy of lost love, and a remarkably positive story of the resilient spirit of those ground down in LA.

Michael says

I had high hopes for this because Kalesniko's *Mail Order Bride* in 2000 (or '01) was so superb. However, this one's merely solid. Not great, but certainly readable.

While dealing with southern California traffic, Kalesniko's alter-ego Alex recalls his start in the animation business and all the b.s. that comes with it - politics, backstabbing, etc., while daydreaming about how he imagined it would be - a creative, exciting and supportive environment, set in a 1930s deco-style city. It's a great premise - the characters are solid, but the comic meanders a little too much between the traffic jam, the young Alex's first arrival in L.A., his beginnings in animation, his dreams of what could be, and sequences of him as a child absorbing television fantasies.

Helen says

This is a fabulous graphic novel that takes place while the protagonist Alex is sitting in LA freeway traffic, although occasionally the traffic does move, while he thinks back to his life - how it's unfolded from his childhood, and even how his life might have played out in an idealized, dreamlike LA of yore.

There are many strands woven together, these are more than flashbacks, they are what comprises Alex's life - his obsessions/worries as he waits in traffic. His life is playing out while he waits - and the stories explain what he is worrying about, or thinking about, or fantasizing about. That's an extremely simplified way of describing how the book works.. actually, the book can be read very quickly, rather than my trying to explain or describe the flashbacks and so forth, a reader can read the book and see for themselves.

I enjoyed the stripped-down drawing style - and the dialogue/characterizations were immediately understandable. The protagonist was highly nuanced, and the book draws you into his anguish at being stuck in traffic, and yearning for an earlier era in LA, when there were fewer cars, an era of perhaps more elegance. Or what we might think was a more stylized, formal era - maybe since we mostly know of it as depicted in motion pictures of that time, which do not necessarily show how the majority of people actually lived. Still, we can get an idea of how most people lived in the 1940s or 1950s even looking at old family photos (or, sometimes, movies). There were tens of millions less people in the US in those days - there was less crowding, there were undoubtedly fewer cars. Also, the US might have become more urbanized anyway

- these trends, of increasing population and urbanization - ended up leading to the traffic jams, unending cars in LA.

There is also one sequence though of Alex taking mass transit home, from an outlying area - which consists of light rail, running alongside a freeway at times. There is more mass transit now - he remembers the past & lost era of streetcars in LA. The juxtaposition of his present misery sitting in traffic vs. the past seemingly more "glorious" time, is just one of the "heartbreaking" subtexts in the book. There is so much heartbreak - which makes the book so compelling. He's "fated" seemingly to never make it. His affair with a co-worker comes to naught, because of her responsibilities to her parents/family; that's contrasted with the family his earlier "alter ego" "incarnation" develops - marriage, kid, home, etc. The entire book is an homage to how fate somehow conspires to screw him - recurring fantasy/"paranoid" sequences of disasters that might befall the driven are woven into the narrative. I won't give away the final "catastrophe" - suffice it to say that the book winds up on an exceedingly powerful note, possibly yet another fantasy, but we know the story is over with the vacated seat in front of the TV he used to watch as a kid.

I think this book must resonate with many since it describes the typical arc of life: Idealism, high hopes - with career, relationships, and so forth - which gives way to disillusionment, heartbreak, despite the protagonist being a nice guy, things do not go his way. He is essentially driven crazy by circumstance - a crazy boss, a love affair that sputters because his girlfriend's parents take precedence over him, the general anonymity/vastness of LA finally crushing him; several ways of escaping his misery are described, but it's never clear if they are mostly fantasies, or if he has really finally given up on trying to make it in LA. Isn't this what life does to most of us: Turns us from "happy campers" into "haunted/paranoid losers" or something along those lines? Isn't this why most readers will easily identify with the transformation Alex undergoes, as he lives out his life, or recollects his life as he sits in freeway traffic.

Opal Harrison says

Wow.. i didn't expect this at all. The story is a bit hard to follow, but full with intricate details. It's beautifully drawn and packed with intense emotions.

Raina says

The more I think about this book, the more I like it.

Do NOT judge this book by its cover.

I'd read Mail Order Bride by this author and enjoyed it, but vaguely remember seeing the cover for Kalesniko's next work and being turned off. This is much more than it appears to be on the outside.

This is a story of layers. There's the layer of the entire book coming back to the framing of road rage and freeway angst, and that plays well as a metaphor for the frustration our protagonist feels about his life and the things he can't control about it.

Inside that framing are two parallel stories given just about equal time. One is the contemporary story of a man (who happens to have a dog head, in Maus style - none of the other characters look like anything but

humans) who moves to Los Angeles and gets a job working in a Disney-style legendary animation house. Along the way, he meets and begins a relationship with a woman, and becomes disillusioned with the office politics in the workplace he had formerly idolized.

Alongside the contemporary story runs another story, this one also about a man moving to LA, getting a job at a Disney-style animation house, and meeting and romancing a woman. This story, though, is set in the 1940s. And the animation house is a much more stimulating place to be.

My interpretation is that the 1940s world is how the dog-headed character imagined his life would go in the contemporary world when he got a job at the animation studio.

The transitions between the two worlds are shown in three panels - one an image of characters in a location in LA, the next of a fade/morph, and the third of the same location, but in the other time period. Kalesniko thanks a local librarian for access to photos of the 1940s timeperiod of LA, so I gather that his depiction of historical LA is highly accurate.

Anyway, it's a lot of fun - there's a villain, there's plenty of contemporary tragedy, there's the everpresent frustration of the big city commute. It's also pretty depressing. In a good way, though.

BL834 says

The artwork was amazing. The black and white line drawings managed to evoke a variety of feelings, and multiple styles blended together beautifully.

The storyline though... well. Can't say I enjoyed it. Boring, bleak, banal, and other words that don't start with B. What was the point of having an anthropomorphized protagonist when no one else was anything but human? Why should we care about a character with the charisma of tapioca pudding?

The artwork saves this from my "hate it" shelf, but isn't enough to up the star rating.

Ryan says

Amazing art, amazing detail. The story was excellent, albeit majorly depressing. Lots of good humor w/great characters. I can't believe he drew all those cars. Lots of cars.

Anthony Vacca says

A lushly detailed fantasia of memory, flights of fancy and soul-crushing reality, Mark Kalesniko's *Freeway* is a dense comic about the rise and fall of Mark Kalesniko, an anthropomorphic artist with a head full of dreams in a world full of humans and soul-crushing reality. Framed within a Beckettian nightmare of a traffic jam, pooch-faced Kalesniko suffers through a torrent of memories of his disappointing experiences as a small-time artist in a Disney-esque studio, his failed relationship with a former co-worker, his first days of fear and doubt as a fresh face come to L.A. to "be someone", and the petty and increasingly viscous squabbling of his fellow low-level cartoonists--all of which has turned Kalesniko into the embittered mess with IBS that he is today! These recollections are occasionally interrupted with a dream scenario of how he wishes his life and career should have been, played out in an idealized 1950's version of L.A. But even this pleasant delusion is eventually poisoned by soul-crushing reality and visions of all the terrible ways he could

die while stuck in traffic. A very impressive and carefully realized graphic novel that is full of grace and moments of beauty despite the inevitability of soul-crushing reality.

Jennifer Slone says

Freeway is about our dreams verses reality, and more specifically, how office politics can crush our dreams of career achievement.

The protagonist is stuck in a traffic jam throughout the entire story, and endures flashbacks on his career choices and heartaches. He also has horrific daydreams of disaster on the freeway, such as a bathtub coming loose from a oversized truck and crushing him to smithereens - the kind of daydreams (day-mares?) we all have from time-to-time.

I didn't really care about the book until about halfway through, and then, I realized I couldn't wait to see how it would end. The ending was great. Although there were many omens and foreboding signs throughout the tale, I still didn't expect the conclusion.

George Marshall says

Oh dear- lovely art (maybe a little overwrought)- a strong concept, and I liked very much the idea of working around the freeway theme. But Kalesniko never seems to quite work for me. The pacing was too drawn out, the parallel storylines very confusing, especially the violent switches into fantasy auto accidents. In my view the melodrama and over emotive characters that Kalesniko likes work badly in comics..which is a shame because he is very good when he gets it right.

Andrea Mullarkey says

I am not quite sure what to make of this sweeping graphic novel about animation and traffic. It is beautifully drawn and I was particularly attracted to the crammed in images of the cars on the freeways. There is something about the iterative nature of those frames, especially the full-page ones, which was so appealing to me. But the story was disjointed moving between the golden era of 1940s Hollywood animation and the less-than-golden era of 1970s animation. And the narrative flips around within reality and fantasy. Flashbacks, reminiscences and imagined histories collide with the possibly real and possibly imagined threats and obstacles of modern life. There are no clear cuts between these pieces and the overall effect was confusing. Which I assume is the point. Using a traffic jam on a freeway as a metaphor both for his life and the trajectory of the animation industry was cleverly done. For instance there is a shadowy black car that trails him through the traffic jam. What can I say? Reading this book left me feeling anxious. Which means that it was both very well done and somewhat unsatisfying. In the end the only thing I know for sure about this one is that it's the most Los Angeles thing I've ever read.

Sebastian Song says

Mark's visual narration is a thrill to read. One can't help but succumb to the many frustrations and failed dreams of modernity. Life is not a bed of roses.

Matt says

A solid graphic novel that reminded me of the longer Alex Robinson works. Though animation doesn't interest me very much, the behind the scenes details of the studio where the main character works were compelling enough to keep me reading. I loved the carnage fantasies on the freeway too, I'm glad I'm not the only who has those.

David Thomas says

This is actually the second time I've read this. I didn't remember reading it until I picked it up again. Pretty good book, which is strange given that it's mostly about office politics and traffic.

Kitty says

I gave this a three instead of a two because the art, which is amazingly detailed and thorough. I really didn't like the story, though. The author seems quite uninterested in the few female characters, even though they're mostly artists like the protagonist. The protagonist's nostalgia is charming at first and then just weird and ignorant.
