

Venus Magazine

Marjane Satrapi

The Iranian-born *Persepolis* author says she likes being on the outside looking in

Marjane Satrapi's first graphic novel, *Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood*, was about Satrapi's life as a smart, feisty girl living in a time and place when it was not so good to be smart, feisty, or a girl: Iran during the Islamic Revolution.

The book got all kinds of praise, and reviewers compared it to Art Spiegelman's *Maus* with clockwork regularity. What set it apart from *Maus*, however, was her decidedly female, and feminist, take on events. Marjane's new book, *Persepolis 2: The Story of a Return* (Pantheon), covers her teenage years in Vienna, Austria, where her parents sent her to escape the situation in Iran, and where she bounced around from subculture to subculture, never quite fitting in.

Satrapi speaks on the phone from her current home in Paris about the difficulties of writing her books, her love for old people, and the upcoming animated *Persepolis* film.

I read somewhere that you said that it was hard to write the first *Persepolis*, because a lot of hard memories came back.

Oh, yes.

Did you have the same thing happen while writing the second one?

Absolutely—probably, the second one was even harder. At least, when I was in Iran, no matter what the situation was, if it was war, or a revolution, what have you, at least I had a family that was very much loving me, and I felt very secure. In Vienna, that was hard, to be away from family. First of all I was adolescent and full of hormones. Then I was judged because of my nationality, and I didn't have so much money...I went back to Vienna to write [*Persepolis 2*], you know. The first time I tried to go to Vienna, I had a train ticket for three days. After one day, I could not stand it anymore and so I had to come back to Paris. And the second time, I got an open ticket and I stayed for thirteen or fourteen days. I really pushed myself to go to the places I remembered. And I didn't have any good memories. Even though I was a punk and a hippie and all of that, none of them were happy memories.

Do you still know people in Vienna?

One of my teachers that's still teaching over there, who is very nice, and very caring, and I was very happy to see him when I went back to Vienna. But not really, otherwise. What was very funny—that I got to know much later—is that all my friends in Vienna who were very strong anarchists, and against this and against that, are now businessmen and such. Back then, I was the one who looked like the less crazy one, less marginal one, and now...I never wanted, and I will never want, to be in the middle of the society. There are so many wrong things in society, that if I can put myself a little bit on the margin, and look at it from afar, I am much happier.

Do you feel that way in France?

I feel that way everywhere. Society is based on morality, and I never believed in it. Something that is good today can be bad tomorrow...and the day after, you don't know. It just makes you feel guilty, and doesn't give you any rights.

Do you feel like France is more that way? What do you think about the rule forbidding girls to wear headscarves to school, for example?

I'm not at all a religious person, and I was brought up in a very secular family. They pushed me to put a scarf on my head [in Iran], and I did that against my own will, but it was the law. And if you push people not to wear something, you're using the same logic. They say that they do that to protect the girls, etc, etc, but the fact is that [the girls] have one only chance to be emancipated, and that chance is school. If you don't let them in the school, they have to stay at their house, and they have to marry their cousin that comes from somewhere, have his children...In the meantime, the boys who are treating them as whores and bitches if they don't have their scarves, they are continuing to go to school.

So what's your next book going to be about, the one you're working on now?

The next book is about a musician. His wife breaks his instrument, and he tries to replace it. He buys a couple of them, and none of them work. And so since no other instrument makes the noise that he wants, he decides to die, and he lays down, and eight days later, he dies. So it's going to be a very big and difficult thing, to make it in a comic form, but it's interesting, always, to do what you don't know how to do.

And you, yourself appear in it at one point?

Yes, yes, this one will be another big story about the family, and about my country. The man was my mother's uncle, you see.

So have you been talking to your parents a lot about the story, asking them for details?

When I was a child I was very interested in old people, I still am; I'm an old person lover. When I was a child they had the patience to tell stories, and I loved lying down and listening to their stories. So I have huge books of these stories that I had heard from them, small pieces, and then I've resurrected them by imagination. Built the stories around that.

I heard you're working on a film as well.

Yeah, it's an animation of *Persepolis* in black and white. I am working with a friend of mine on the script, and then we are going to direct it together.

And is it going to cover both of the books, or just the first book?

No, it'll be the two books together. That's why you have to remake the scenario, because my books are graphic novels, which go quick for a movie. You have to remake the whole story in a way that is going to make sense.

There are a lot of very quiet moments in the books, and I feel like that won't work so well in the movies.

Yes, exactly. That's exactly what we're working on.

Do you think people reading your books think about the things you were talking about—about society, morality, and such?

I hope so! The purpose for these books, for me, is that people should think to themselves one single second, "It could have been me." The problem with the society of today, people divide everybody up. But the moment we lose the notion of these people as human beings, we can do anything to these people, because they are so different from us. I also wanted to get people to try to understand the suffering of the other. If you think you are the only one who has the privilege to suffer, and that the other person has no right to suffer, then your suffering gives you the right to do whatever you want. If people read these stories and say these people suffer too, in a different way, and they are human beings...if they could think, it could have been me, even if that is not my country? That was my goal, the only intention that I had.

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