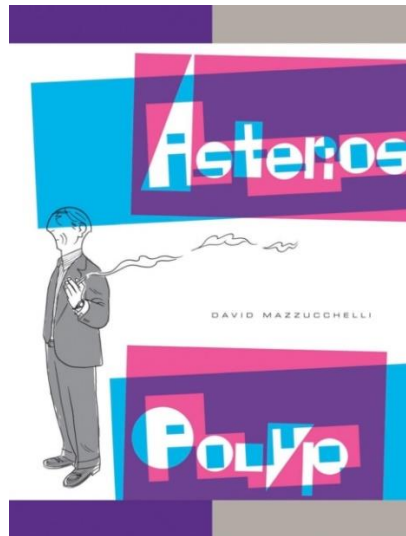




Asterios Polyp by David Mazzucchelli

[Comedy]



Never before have I encountered a graphic novel whose every element – the specific lines, forms, colours, lettering and structure – is deployed so wittily in service to the story.

We begin during a thunderstorm in an apartment wrecked by neglect. Its plants have wilted; its floor is strewn with fast-foods, beer bottles and thrown-off dirty laundry. Pots and pans pile up in the sink as bills pile up on a desk. In his bedroom a dishevelled middle-aged man replays homemade video recordings from an enormous library. This is the life of Asterios Polyp; it's about to go up in smoke.

From here the story splits into two alternating, colour-coded narratives: life after the fire and the events leading up to it, each informing the other. For as Polyp picks himself up, spends his last cash on a bus ticket to the remote town of Apogee, and resourcefully acquires a new room to rent from an employer to work for, he finds his new environment sufficiently nurturing to reflect on what he has lost and why. Key to this is the decent Stiffly Major who takes him in and Ursula Major, his voluptuous wife who is all swirls and curls and curvy floral dresses. At first both appear mildly ridiculous: Stiffly with his malapropisms on defending his country ("That's a fragrant lie!") or approving Ursula's offer to take Asterios on a picnic ("Knock yourself up!"); Ursula with her Shaman shtick, rearranging Polyp's room auspiciously according to his birth date (clutter includes up-ended tables and chairs). Yet Ursula shows an astute understanding which gives Asterios uncommon pause for true self-reflection:

"Well, you know, in life, things are seldom either/or. It's that kind of simplistic thinking that creates fanatics."



Polyp, you see, was one such fanatic, as we discover during the colder blue sequences which gradually led him to living alone in his derelict flat. Bullishly, he used to define everything by its opposite with no middle ground. He broke everything into two, perhaps because, as he perceived it, he himself had been broken in two in the womb: severed from a stillborn, identical twin. He then grew up with a craving for knowledge, his career built on a reputation for elaborate architectural plans, not one of whose buildings was ever been constructed. He was all abstract theory, not practice. So he became a lecturer, partly, it seems, because it afforded him ample opportunity for withering and supercilious put-downs, and an audience for arguments which he was determined to win. In short, he liked to show off, grabbing the spotlight wherever and whenever he could and at anyone's expense.

As soon as his wife starts to describe their holiday in her timid lower case within an easily punctured, round speech balloon, Asterios interrupts to correct her in his customary CAPITAL LETTERS BORDERED BY AN IMPENETRABLE BOX. His words obscure hers: he *literally* talks over her.



Mazzucchelli assigns everyone their own typeface according to temperament. As to the duality, not only are there twin narratives, but each is told in *two* tones which form the cold colours of the past contrasting with the sunshine yellow and purple of the present. There's a particularly telling middle tier which in Asterios and his wife are divided from each other by contrasting colours and radically different renditions: he is a precisely defined geometrical construct of cylinders and line (as he perceives his himself; others might consider it hollow), while the supposed love of his life is but a blur to him, shrinking into the borderless background while he faces away.

Everything's a matter of perspective, and it's all been thought through. No wonder the book took Mazzucchelli a decade to compose. The palettes do combine towards the end, but I'll leave you to discover why and what happens next. But it's fortunate that none of Polyp's plans were constructed because he never has grasped the vitality of foundations. It takes a band's bass guitarist to point out the obvious with not *two* but *three* beer mats which only together form a mutually supportive tripod:

"Love... trust... respect... Take any one of those away and the whole thing falls apart."

