

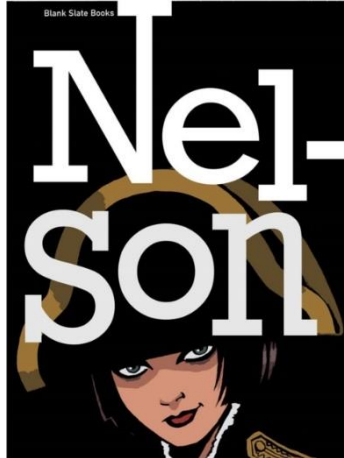


Nelson

[Contemporary Fiction]

Nelson by Rob Davis & Woodrow Phoenix with 52 further stellar creators

Possibly the greatest British graphic novel of all time: discuss.



"It was never supposed to be this way. We were supposed to be a team. You and me against the world. You left me, Sonny. Left me to do all this on my own."

Oh, just pick your favourite UK creators: they're virtually all here. 54 in total including TAMARA DREWE's Posy Simmonds, and half the joy of this unequivocal masterpiece is anticipating which top-tier artist's coming next!

This isn't, however, an anthology: born of much cogitation and distillation of what each era meant to its creators, this a single story told by a relay race of craftsmen improbably coordinated with remarkable precision and dexterity by original instigator Rob Davis (THE MOTHERLESS OVEN trilogy) and the mighty Woodrow Phoenix of CRASH COURSE / RUMBLE STRIP fame. Each artist recounts a snapshot day in the life of one Nel Baker from 1968 to 2011, and the variety is as delightful as the baton-passing is fluid. Not one transition unintentionally jars. Sean Phillips, for example, has switched from his customary twilight to a no-less-expressive burst of open summer sunshine for a family confrontation over a barbeque. It's absolutely seamless. And priceless: it will speak to you.

What's more it is even *appropriate* that this book shifts styles, for each of our own differing days are coloured by our mood swings, environment, the company we keep, the opportunities that arise, the maturity we muster... and the drugs that we take, whether medicinal or recreational. The choice of Philippa Rice (SOPPY / WE'RE OUT) to gaily illustrate Nel's recuperative holiday on 'happy pills' after (GIRL / HELLBOY) Duncan Fegredo's dark, neoclassical watercolour washes of depression is absolutely inspired. That a much younger Nel perceives a rapacious, tenacious landlord repossessing the family's telly as a boss-eyed burgundy monster – all knuckles and fur thanks to LOOSHKIN's Jamie Smart – is perfect, for I once barged in on an uncle whom I'd never met and declared the bed's slumbering, hairy occupant to be a monkey. I honestly thought he was a monkey.



In summary: each creator has brought their own ideas, styles and strengths to the party, undiluted yet directed (in equal measure) both by an astonishing discipline required to maintain the overall narrative and a generous flexibility which could only have come from two confident fellow creators like Phoenix and Davis who trust, cherish and respect the sanctity of individual artistic expression.

Nel Baker was born on June 15th 1968. Her dad anticipated a son he was going to call Nelson. He even bought a hollow statuette of the navy commander to commemorate the day. Turns out that Jim and Rita Baker had twins, so they divided the one name in two: Nel and Sonny. Unfortunately Sonny died within five months, leaving young, rebellious and hyperactive Nel with the vacuum of loss in her life which she is instinctively aware of from an early age, compensating with an imaginary substitute she blames for her own misdemeanours and who, after a series of hard knocks, will return to plague her later. As Nel grows older her one dream, vital vein and passion for Art is rubbed raw against the pressures to earn a decent living, the supercilious antipathy of her tutors towards true individuality, and finally her materialistic younger sister's badgering to give up, "grow up" and compromise; to settle down and live a life like hers with a husband, two kids and an extension. Nor does her mother doesn't give up on the idea of more grandchildren: "Just part of Operation Nail Nel's Feet to the Floor..."

Like everyone's journey, Nel's is no straight trajectory. Friendships flourish, some wither away; others are rekindled later on. Sometimes it's the least likely whose bonds are strongest. Tabitha, raised in relative seclusion by her domineering, hyper-religious parents would seem an odd match for Nel but some rebellions start later than others and it may have been the very clandestine nature of their friendship, conducted whenever they can, which appealed to the rogue in Nel. Sex has a habit of complicating things, even early fumbblings. There's a great scene drawn by ORDINARY's D'Israeli, set on some swings as a fifteen-year-old Nel buckles under the threat of extra maths tuition at the expense of her afternoon Art lesson and falls against Les, stealing a kiss. Surprised, he returns the passion only to get smacked in the face and called "perv!" But as Nel walks away her sly satisfaction is obvious...

Seemingly random moments turn out to be key when reprised later on. The big ones I'll keep to myself, but another occurs when clearing out Aunt Kitt's house. Nel was sent to stay there as a child – why, she only discovers as an adult – and Warwick Johnson-Cadwell (24 BY 7) does a bang-up job in four short pages of breathing a ridiculous amount of complexity into the seemingly strict old lady.

"Do you remember my rules?"

"I am very welcome here and I am not to touch your things."

But this same Aunt Kitt – who makes Nel wash up, peel the spuds and then pluck a chicken – merrily chuffs on a pipe all day, falls asleep after a bottle of booze and has a house filled with exotica including a lavishly illustrated, leather-bound copy of 1001 Arabian Nights. And (just as I defaced my early LPs with wax crayon) Nel can't resist scrawling all over the two beautiful pages before hearing Aunt Kitt stomp up the stairs. Gasping, she quickly returns to the book to the shelf. Thirteen years (and therefore many pages) later and Nel's back in that bedroom, and there on the shelf sits the book with her juvenile drawings. A note falls out in Aunt Kitt's handwriting that will certainly make you smile.



Bursting with social history, this is the story of our own lives too. Anyone living in Britain during this period will recognise the cultural artefacts and political events which informed our existence: sideburns, tall hair and Mary Quant fashions; overt racism from previous generations which found its way into the home (dad Jim; "Our Neil ain't gonna grow up listening to that. I mean it."); the first moon landing, an event of such significance that families would congregate around their first TV set; energy shortages and three-day weeks; I Spy books, Space Hoppers and Daleks; taping the Top 20 by microphone on early cassette recorders, dancing to Mud's Tiger Feet; the Notting Hill Carnival whose heat and sounds pound on the pages thanks to Paul Peart-Smith's forms and colours; "Coal Not Dole" stickers, hideous brown and orange patterned wallpaper; Socialist Worker and mass unemployment; the rise of the vegetarian movement, the fall of the Berlin Wall; raves, ecstasy, September 11th...



It's familiar, it's funny, and in places it's halting. I love every single page by every single creator.

For more on NELSON's creation, please see the foreword and afterword by Rob Davis and Woodrow Phoenix, respectively

Full NELSON credits in order of appearance: Paul Grist, Rob Davis, Woodrow Phoenix, Ellen Lindner, Jamie Smart, Gary Northfield, Sarah McIntyre, Suzy Varty, Sean Longcroft, Warwick Johnson-Cadwell, Luke Pearson, Paul Harrison-Davies, Katie Green, Paul Peart-Smith, Glyn Dillon, I.N.J.Culbard, John Allison, Philip Bond, D'Israeli, Simone Lia, Darryl Cunningham, Jonathan Edwards, Ade Salmon, Kate Charlesworth, Warren Pleece, Kristyna Baczynski, Harvey James, Rian Hughes, Sean Phillips, Pete Doree, Kate Brown, Simon Gane, Jon McNaught, Adam Cadwell, Faz Choudhury, JAKE, Jeremy Day, Dan McDaid, Roger Langridge, Will Morris, Dave Shelton, Carol Swain, Hunt Emerson, Duncan Fegredo, Philippa Rice, Josceline Fenton, Garen Ewing, Tom Humberstone, Dan Berry, Alice Duke, Posy Simmonds, Laura Howell, Andi Watson, Dave Taylor

