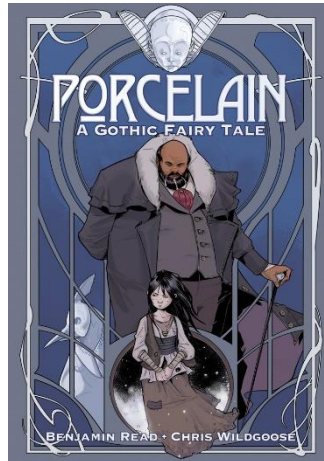




Porcelain by Ben Read & Chris Wildgoose with André May

[Young Adults]

Our biggest-selling series, at Page 45 PORCELAIN's second book even outsold Neil Gaiman's return to SANDMAN, published by DC with its multi-million-dollar advertising budget, while PORCELAIN was published from a British farmhouse with an advertising budget of approximately zero.



PORCELAIN is the steampunk story of a street-thief who discovers a craftsman's creative genius in animating porcelain then strives to build her own determinedly principled legacy whilst under merciless pressure from a military determined to save lives at the expense of those on the other. The arguments will rage. They will enrage. And then...? It's the military. Then they'll give way to force.

PORCELAIN has a heart cast from gold. Your own heart will swell, only to be ripped right from your rib cage, then smashed to smithereens towards the trilogy's end by a writer you presumed far too kind to care so little for your comfort. The Mucha-liked covers narrate the trajectory of our suspicious, defiant and gutsy individual's ascent from orphaned Child to adopted Lady to adoptive Mother. What they conceal is all the adversity. If PORCELAIN's about family, it's also about all the walls.

Book I opens high above the snow-swept rooftops of an affluent European city before settling in front an elaborate wrought-iron gate locked firmly against all intruders. Outside a crowd with no homes gather in patched-up clothing too thin to keep the cold at bay. "This is a bad idea!" The bad idea's to break in. Child is the one volunteered, her initial resistance beaten right out of her. She's hoisted up onto the walls before hopping helter-skelter down the branches of an ancient tree. Immediately twin furnace-fired eyes flash in the dark: the property is protected by panthers.



What follows is far from predictable as Child bluffs her way into the heart and home of their Maker; but it won't be easy as any adoptive parent of a young one long-orphaned will tell you. Ben Read's script is charming. Its lilt is lovely and the dialogue dances as the twinkle-eyed aristocrat humours her affection of airs and graces – she is quite the performer – and you can see them bonding right before your eyes. Far from supercilious or sardonic, he indulges her ways with grace.

“As you're staying now, would you mind not keep pocketing the spoons?”
“I just thought that if we had tea later, I'll be prepared.”

The art and colouring is to cry for: gas lamps glow on a cold winter's night; the Maker's beard is as lush as you like and summer gardens seem to go on forever underneath the pink and purple wisteria. Later still there's a fruit-rich orchard avenue, a double-page spread based on a Ming Dynasty Chinese war ship (whose scooped white sails are echoed in the shapes of the panels below it while their arrangement across the page reflects its forward-thrusting profile) and the final volume's vast tower structure fuses the European with Persian minarets and futurist buttressing, gangways and gardens.



As the Porcelain evolve, so do Chris Wildgoose's designs including Gog and Magog who become lithier than ever. The lines are crisp but never stiff, never without humanity. Some of the Porcelain are slender and others ape-like while Alder, the loyalist of the loyal, has a gentleness in spite of his hulking body and massive, heavy hands. Letter artist Jim Campbell accentuates their individuality with subtle variations within their speech balloons, and colour artist André May eloquently evokes seasons, weather fluctuations and times of day, even indoors. It's a predominantly soft, complementary palette which May employs so that when the green glows, it does so eerily, ethereally, but by contrast – in several eye-smacking scenes – as aggressively as if it were red.

Book II: Ten years on, and Child is now wealthy Lady, having inherited the Porcelain Maker's estate and learned his craft. She's refining his designs and creating new Porcelain, but she's also desperately trying to undo the damage she's done. For she discovered his secret at a cost to them both and has complicated things beyond your imagining. Now the military has come a-calling, and it will not take “No” for an answer.

BOOK III: Child came from nothing. Lady built so much, but Mother is another proposition altogether. She has surrounded her estate – full of Porcelain scientists, craftsmen and guardsmen – with a vast, impenetrable wall and built high into the sky the most enormous tower which casts its imposing shadow over the surrounding city, forever drawing attention to its lofty self-seclusion. She has seen everything and everyone she holds dear assaulted and under siege. She has done things in the interest of expediency which she prays no one will ever know. But it's all coming out now, and it's all going to come crashing down.

Does our commanding ex-street thief having something fresh and unexpected up her sleeve? She does. Yes, she does. Oh. I'm very much afraid that she does.

