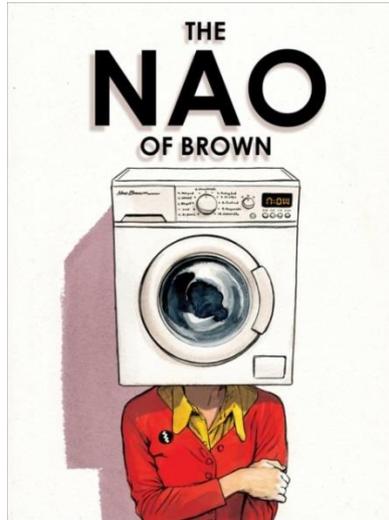


The Nao of Brown by Glyn Dillon

[Contemporary Fiction]



Exquisitely beautiful with the softest of pencil lines and crisply lit, coloured washes, *THE NAO OF BROWN* is my immediate go-to graphic novel for *anyone* who's never read comics. Full of humanity, it is tender and compassionate and very, very funny in places. In others, it is startlingly dark.

28-year-old Nao has adopted her English mother's maiden name of Brown because her father who's moved back to Japan has become a drunken disappointment to her. She's sharply dressed, chic, intelligent, playful and culturally well versed. She's also an artist whom Dillon draws poring intently over her drawings, but the American toy company which has been courting her with incessant enthusiasm suddenly went radio-silent, so Nao sent them an email to nudge them back into action.

"I didn't think I'd been rude... so I was quite surprised by the speedy and hostile response I got."

"Hostile?"

"Well, in my attempt to be professional yet curt, I'd signed off with just "regards"... but the G and T are pretty close to each other on the keyboard."



Nao's telling this to an old Art School friend who offers her a job in his designer vinyl toy shop where she takes bright delight in her customer service until a washing machine repairman called Gregory pops in by mistake. Dressed in denim, he's broad with a tidily trimmed beard and to Nao he looks just like The Nothing from Japanese folklore. And she is *smitten*. But he's a washing machine repairman who's just walked in by *mistake*. So how on earth will the two meet again...?!

"Well, I've not seen anything quite like that before..." says Gregory, peering down the back of Nao's washing machine. "... looks like someone hacked away at it with a carving knife."
 "Really?" replies Nao, all insouciant. "We do have a mouse problem."

Brilliant, charming! It's all so delightful, just like Nao herself!

Unfortunately ever since the very first page something has been simmering away, and not even in the background. Here she is cycling home through the rain, one hand holding up an umbrella:

"Mum loves me...
 "Mum loves me...
 "Mum loves me..."

Soon she's standing on a London Underground platform next to a Help Point as a train approaches.



"The Underground is always... 'challenging'.
 "But with the jetlag kicking in, on an empty stomach... I felt really on edge.
 "All it takes is a little shove..."

The silhouette of a man, arms flailing, can be seen as the Tube train bears down upon him.

"... 9 out of 10... again."



Nao, you see, suffers from a specific Obsessive Compulsive Disorder which is a very far cry from touching each lamp post you pass. Beneath her seemingly limitless calm lurks a volcanic rage that can be triggered even during a Buddhist meditation class. They're bursts of murderous fury: violent flash-fantasies she feels boiling up inside her, barely contained by the mantras she's taught herself, like her mother's unconditional love. She hasn't acted on them, but she doesn't trust herself around knives, scissors or small children. Those she adores she deems at risk and gradually you begin to understand the full extent of her trauma, the fixations which consume her once a stray thought takes hold and sends her into a spiral of self-recrimination and self-loathing that can paralyse her for hours.

Imagine going on a first date and having to lock yourself in a toilet for an hour, *then* being unable to explain it for fear of freaking your potential *beau* or *belle* out forever...

I love the way the light falls across Nao's cheek in triangles, and the way she delicately holds a teaspoon just-so. Like comics' great Andi Watson, Dillon's single-lined, arched eyebrows carry more nuanced expression than most oil painters can pack into a full portrait, and I adore Nao's customer-service switches from the pulled-in-tight smile of "I goofed", to open-mouthed, exhilarated success!

There's also so much culture on offer. Nao visits the West London Buddhist Centre regularly, with much affection for Ray in particular who teaches more than just art.

"Enso is just the Japanese word for circle. It's not a calligraphy character, it's a zen symbol, symbolising enlightenment, the universe... the void... it's an expression of the 'moment'. So, once it's done, that's it, there's no tidying it up or changing it."

Painted with a single sweep of the brush, it can also look remarkably like a washing machine window in full spin. Nao has filled a whole wall with washing-machine Endos at home. It's another of her fixations. She's permanently set on the same cycle, round and round and round.

Something's got to give.

