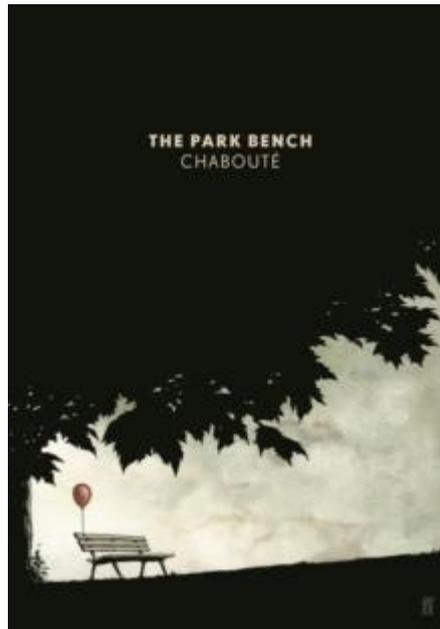




The Park Bench by Chabou 

[Contemporary Fiction]

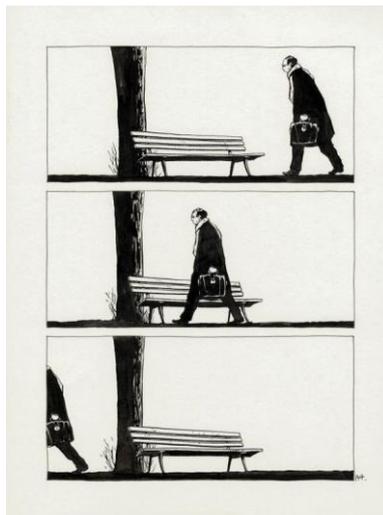


Do you often sit on park benches? Maybe you just pass them by?

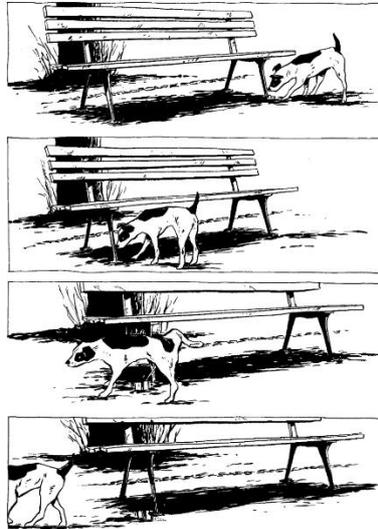
But if you *do* sometimes sit down to catch your breath, have a snack or simply gaze at the scenery, do you ever wonder who else was once perched there? Who was its last occupant, and what did they do? Who'll be its next, and what will they be thinking?

There's a bloke with a briefcase who strides right every morning on his way to work; then left, later on, a little limp and exhausted. He's been doing that for years: day in, day out, he clocks in, trudges out. Another guy regularly whizzes by on a skateboard, flipping over the seat's length to land gracefully on its other side. The bench also forms part of a dog's daily routine. Usually it only pauses to mark its territory with pungent spray, but sometimes the rain has set in, so it covers for cover underneath.

Over 10 seasons and 325 silent but exceptionally communicative black and white pages, Chabou  charts the course of two dozen or so lives whose route regularly takes them via the park bench. A lot can happen in two and a half years. People can change, even the most staid or conformist, or have change thrust upon them. You could find yourself pregnant – twice!



Some visitors will leave their mark. Right at the beginning a girl watches a boy carve a message for posterity: “I ♥ U”. It’s going to survive the groundsman’s next lick of paint, but this graffiti won’t: “THE WORLD’S STUPIDITY IS INFINITE.” That’s true enough. A young man plonks himself down so that his t-shirt’s slogan artless replaces two of the words behind him, while the paper bag in his hand covers a couple more letters, leaving: “THE PARTY IS FINITE.” This is equally sobering. Something similar occurs with a newspaper headline.



We’re shown the bench from many angles, from many heights, but we never quite see what its occupants see, just a glimpse of a tree-line beyond. In quick succession two very similar women open two very different letters. What *they* see will change their lives substantially. Their expressions are so very subtle yet telling, but we’ll only discover the specifics later on.

Interactions between individuals whose paths you thought would never cross spark surprising results, while older relationships will evolve in astonishing ways. The belligerent park warden is bloody-minded, officious and oh so proud of his cap. He issues written warnings to a quiet old man with a long grey beard and two rucksacks. Sometimes the Methuselah manages to catch a kip whilst spread out at night unmolested, but mostly his is one long history of harassment. Where that one goes, eventually, left me in howls of laughter, and I loved how, on first arrival, the itinerant fetches a bottle of wine from one backpack and takes time to inspect its label for provenance and quality. We all deserve dignity; some of us inherently possess it. Never be too quick to judge



My favourite park pilgrims are an elderly couple who dote on each other, their mutual adoration undiminished. Once seated, the woman looks up into her husband's eyes with the most tender gaze of unequivocal love that I have ever beheld, while her Master of Ceremonies opens a small cardboard box on his lap, takes out his penknife and cuts their shared cream cake in two. There is no hurried tradition, for the sun in front of them eventually slides down until we spy them in silhouette. Eventually the gentleman helps her up and off they slowly stroll, but they'll be back. They'll buy a different cake next time, and the perhaps next...

Under such a commanding conductor as Chabou te this graphic novel would have brought enough joy had all the lives stayed separate, but they don't. Nor do they stand still. Instead the orchestration is interwoven and moves in multiple, specific directions with an emphatic end... and then an epilogue.

Some stories continue even when you suspect that they won't.

