

Of Awards and Artworks

By Karen Green

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I'm not sure I mentioned this before, but I had the incredible privilege of being asked to be an [Eisner Awards judge](#) for 2011. This was a long-held dream come true (thanks again, Jackie Estrada!), and an opportunity both to immerse myself in all of 2010's comics and graphic novels, and also to hang out with five or six like-minded folks for five days of even more reading mixed with endless discussion.

The Eisners work similarly to the Oscars: a panel of judges identifies [a list of nominees](#), in close to thirty categories, and then the professional community votes on the nominations, with the [winners](#) announced at a gala ceremony in July at Comic-Con International in San Diego.

I flattered myself that I was prepared for the nomination process, having read about 70 or 80 titles by the time the judges met in March to work on the list of nominees. Then I walked into the conference room where all the submissions were piled and just blanched. It was an extremely intense few days. The word "daunting" was bandied about. Frequently.

But one of the best things about being an Eisner judge, in addition to the incredible honor, and in addition to the indescribable fun of spending several days doing nothing but reading and talking comics with the other judges, was that it forced me to read titles that I might not have gotten to as quickly otherwise—or gotten to at all. And one such title was a graphic novel by the husband and wife team of writer [Kathryn](#) and artist [Stuart Immonen](#): [Moving Pictures](#).

What first struck me upon opening this slim volume was the dramatic nature of the art. The faces of the small cast of characters are starkly, simply drawn, often shown engulfed in shadow. Their faces, their expressions, are as obscure to us as they are to each other; the story is a tale of secrets both personal and professional. As with the opaque, reflective glasses on the mother in David Small's [Stitches](#) (discussed [here](#)), it rewards the reader to be attentive to when those faces are revealed.

In other visual effects, the speech balloons are plump and perfectly round, tethered to the speakers' mouths by the slenderest thread. The choice seems to highlight the tenuous connection that these heavily-weighted spoken words can have to what is left unsaid, and to the characters' possible disavowal of what they do say. Indeed, the first five pages of the book are completely wordless, allowing the reader to absorb the mise-en-scène without the intervention of the characters themselves.

The simplicity of these depicted characters is belied by the richer depictions of the works of art they discuss, however. The story presents a complex dance between two people: a Musée du Louvre curator named Ila Gardner and a Nazi interrogator, Rolf Hauptmann. Hauptmann, who introduces himself as a member of the German Military Art Commission (although he is more likely from the Gestapo), is trying to determine the current location of many of the Louvre's works (it's no secret that Hitler was accumulating an epic collection of European art) and Gardner may or may not be responsible for moving many of the works to secret and more secure locations. In a five-page spread, Stuart Immonen conveys the interrogator's questions by delicate and intricately drawn images of famous works of art looming over the two speakers in silhouette, the simple outlines acting in contrast to the complex levels of their dance, and the finely-shaded renderings of the artworks in contrast to the uncomplicated fact of their being.

The interrogation tango is made even more complex, we eventually realize, by the personal relationship that exists between the two: Ila and Rolf are not only interrogator and interrogated but they are also lovers. A discussion about the value of things acts as commentary on the value of their own lives in wartime: "Things, objects, people...they don't have to attract attention to have value," observes Rolf, to which Ila retorts, "Value to whom, exactly? And what do you know about the value of things?" The value of things is elusive and fluid, but actual. The value of people is unquantifiable. In wartime Europe, these values have shifted.

The relationship between Ila and Rolf shifts as well. "You are indifferent to me," he complains. "It makes me suspicious." "I do not make you suspicious," Ila replies. "You have orders to be suspicious." Ila disavows any investment in their relationship, or, really, in anything, given the times they live in: "If the world can turn into this, if we can turn around and find entire schools full of children gone, towns emptied overnight and no one saw a thing...Then tomorrow we may also wake up and find the rain has ceased to fall and the wine has all gone sour and we do not recognize our own faces. If today is possible, then anything is possible and nothing matters." But in truth one thing does matter to Ila: protecting the museum's art works. And it may be that she is drawn to Rolf because, not long after his arrival at the Louvre, she discovered him standing—for five minutes and two seconds—in front of a [de Chirico](#), not just looking at it but *seeing* it. Surely there is reclaimable material in someone who sees in art something more than prestige or investment?

The story reveals itself slowly, erratically, episodically, elliptically. The dialogue is pellucid, lapidary; smart and often witty. In one passage, Ila is down in the museum's storage space with a shipper, who smokes endlessly as he ponders how to pack Veronese's 1563 painting, "The Wedding at Cana." I was going to reproduce four pages of their dialogue, but that seems madness when it's so much more efficient and effective for you all to read it for yourselves in its visual context:

Again, the art complements the dialogue beautifully. This is a straightforward conversation with a straightforward working man and, as a result, the faces of the two are, for the most part, clear and well-lit. The cigarette-smoking packer puffs smoke clouds that take on the same perfect spherical shape as the speech balloons, as if to emphasize their function as his cogitative aid.

Another visual motif is sheets of paper: reams piled on a table, forms filed in folders, letters left

on a bed, sheaves floating through the air, their rectangular mass seemingly morphing into yet another rectangle, a flag. Papers are a medium for documentation, for memory. So, too, are flags, both of them acting as blank slates on which to convey meaning and on which, in this place and time, the honor and future of a nation may rest. The "Military Art Commission" is a bureaucracy run on paper, burying itself and others in paper, as soldiers are buried in a flag.

In the context of the story, art is both potent, immanent, but also subject to quantifiable inventory. In another sequence of interrogation, Ila downplays her curatorial role. "Do you know what my responsibilities have been for the past...forever? Pasting little coloured dots on the backs of things. First-class, second-class, third-class. Yes, no, maybe. Size, value, importance, fragility. Little dots on everything. You look at the back of any work, the base of any statue, and you can read right there in this palsied, chromatic Morse code, the history it carries and the future which has been decided for it. It's not cataloging, it's sentencing." And this, of course, is what Rolf's nation is doing, not to works of art, but to human beings, all across Europe. Not dots, but tattooed numbers. Not Morse code, but a finger pointing to the right or to the left. Not cataloging, but sentencing.

To make a brief but hopefully relevant digression: when I was in library school, I took a class in which we read a fascinating book: [Sorting Things Out: Classification and its Consequences](#). The authors examine the inherently human compulsion to categorize: sorting laundry, identifying nurses' tasks for insurance billing, listing causes of death in a 17th-century mortality table, creating a system of apartheid in South Africa. But, they point out, there are always cases that fail to fit into our carefully-plotted taxonomies, and must be torqued, like [Procrustes'](#) guests on his iron bed, into the best *possible* category. The design of the categories themselves often represents some sort of moral or political agenda. So too with curators. So too with Nazis. The consequences are, of course, more dramatic when the items being classified are human beings. In the case of the Nazis, they had such difficulty defining the parameters of their categories, that they found themselves continually expanding them—and engulfed an entire continent in the process.

When I decided to write about *Moving Pictures*, I was thinking about it solely in terms of my Eisner judging experience—something that I'd enjoyed reading so much and might not have got to otherwise, something that I enthusiastically pressed on my fellow judges. But as I began re-reading it for this column, I found that the book builds seamlessly on those [Louvre graphic novels](#) I wrote about a month or so ago. Obviously, all concern works held in the Louvre. But they also look at the connection—merited or not—between humanity and art, on the duty (again, merited or not) that we owe our patrimony, whether national or global. Not all may agree on that duty. As Ila's sister Jane says to her at the train station, as Jane escapes from Paris, disapproving of Ila's decision to stay, "A bunch of pictures. Ugly old men and women. Prostitutes and Politicians. It's not like you even get to work with the good stuff."

Sadly, *Moving Pictures* did not garner any Eisner nominations; I couldn't encourage enough of my fellow judges to hold it in quite as high regard as I did. Ah, well. It's not a book for everyone, perhaps. But for those willing to give themselves over to its sometimes elusive and unyielding charms, it offers a meditation on the value of art, the value of life, and the steps some will go to in order to preserve both.

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