

It's been a good couple of weeks for Empowered Fans. Volume 9 has just been announced for a mid-august release and now, to tide us over, Dark Horse has collected all six Empowered one-shots into one lovely volume that should fit in nicely with its sisters on the shelf. It's definitely interesting to see the six stories wrapped up in a single package. Not only do the shared elements, like the frequent presence of Teknofetish, make for a nice, vague sense of unity, but it's pretty cool to watch the concept of Emp's one-off adventures evolve. The first story, "The Wench With A Million Sighs", is definitely the short that tries to cover the most ground. Though I think later installments benefitted from a slightly narrower focus, it does the best job of shrinking and replicating the effect of a full volume. Everything from Thugboy's valiant attempts to convince Emp of her beauty to the Caged Demonwolf's loquaciousness to Emp's heartbreaking relationship with her father is represented. It's likely not quite enough to fully understand the entirety of Empowered Unchained, but it is a nice entry point for new fans and readers requiring a refresher. The battle with Irresistimovable is fun and clever, ending in a logical fashion and keeping the suspense high enough not to drag in the middle, while the ideas around Emp's sighs are cute. I especially like Ninjette's likening them to kanji. "The Wench With a Million Sighs" is also the only story in this collection that's purely illustrated by Adam Warren himself. It's probably best that way. While part of the fun of this collection is seeing other artists take their shot at the characters, this not only eases us in but lets Warren handle the story with the broadest sense of what Empowered is. His drawings of Emp and Thugboy walk the line between sexy and adorable, as always, and the battle seems extremely suited to the bombastic, high-motion style Warren employs. "Ten Questions for the Maidman" is even stronger. Split between an interview with the titular badass, Empowered and friends' commentary on the "Sanitary Sentinel", and a short tale of Emp's successes and failures with a new crime-fighting strategy, this one-shot is much tighter and equally charming. Warren clearly adores coming up with kennings for his panty-clad avenger and, while it's a bit much at times, effective use of repetition and the "lower third" allows Warren to keep the story moving and the jokes flowing. Each of the stories get a nice ending and Maidman's seriousness and honesty make him a great costar for the story. Emily Warren "(No Relation!)" is the series' first guest artist and brings a bit more of a western influence to the look of her pages, appropriate for the Dark Knight-inspired Maidman but her faces are a little geometric at times. Still, Ms. Warren does a fine job of keeping her pages varied despite the limitations of the interview format and introduces some wonderful abstractions, often using Maidman's doily iconography to great effect. It's also worth noting that Warren is primarily a colorist and, in that element, the story looks great. Adam Warren still handles Emp's section, though based on the little we see I'd be happy to see Emily Warren's take on our favorite body conscious heroine. Particularly with another artist picking up some of the slack, Mr. Warren really goes all out on the detail, with some especially intense backgrounds and tech in this short. It's pretty incredible how legible it all is when so many artists' compositions get bogged down by background detail, and all this without the benefit of color! The third one-shot, "Hell Bent or Heaven Sent" is probably one of the weaker ones. There's a nice sense of time pressure and it's always fun to see Emp geek out, but the villains, as it were, aren't exactly complex. The ideas in this one are cute though and its another nice little mystery to solve with Emp. Ryan Kinnaird is our guest artist this time and he's well suited to the material. The designs for the mechangels are pretty great, and they balance nicely between the attractive and the uncannily perfect. The other characters don't fare quite as well, everything looks a little too slick, too smoothed out, and Emp and Mechanismo look just a little off to me. The texture work that is so effective on a nanotech infestation is a little

odd on our heroes. Still, Kinnaird's Captain Rivet certainly strikes an imposing figure and Emp's victory is oddly bittersweet thanks to the sudden shift in the mechangel's demeanor. "Animal Style" is our half-way point and it's a nice change of pace. A different take on the basic Empowered structure, a bonanza of clever ideas, and a look at Elissa in her college days make this one of the book's stronger chapters. For most writers a superhero autoshow would probably be enough - who couldn't get some laughs out of thieves trying to swipe the Redbird or the Shocker's buggy - but Warren goes the extra step and includes rare automobiles from all manner of alternate universes. The "Armageddon-Alley" universe in particular gets some special attention and seems like the sort of thing that could easily become the basis for a longer story, even if only for the fun of exploring a 'dark and gritty' Emp-verse. It's also really fun to see Emp pulling out some superhero theory again and it makes for a tense but unashamedly awesome extended battle sequence. The members of Animal Style are pretty fun and make for decent antagonists, even if they're mostly there to demonstrate some of Emp's advanced buttkicking maneuvers. I also have to say that while it's not hard to figure out what's going on with Animal Style's recurring "close window" schtick, it doesn't feel all that present until we get to see it for ourselves towards the end of the story and, as a result, falls a little flat. The present day art, provided by John Staton, is strong and dynamic, helping to lead the reader through Emp's planning and improvisation. Warren has said that he designs the plot of each one-shot based on the artist he's working with and that's perhaps clearest in this story with the high-tech villains and aisles of cars playing easily into Staton's strengths. His depiction of Emp, herself, isn't bad, possessing a pleasingly cartoonish elasticity, but occasionally leaves her looking a little distorted with strange head shapes or awkward fits for her mask. I would also be remiss if I didn't mention how much character Warren wrings out of "angry hoodie college Emp." Though Warren's pages essentially consist of this younger version of our hero standing in a white void, he makes them feel essential by communicating a lot about Emp in her younger, and by extension current, incarnations. "Nine Beers with Ninjette" may be the best of the one-shot stories contained within this book. Where the last few have tended to remind us of how awesome Empowered can get, this tale aims straight for the heartstrings. An evolution of the 'Maidman' structure, this achronological tale of Ninjette's past and personality is by far the most affecting and 'important' of the one-shots. There's still comedy, but it's all marked by a distinct bittersweetness. Though the way Ninjette tries alcohol is a little convoluted, it's an enormous treat to find out how Ninjette's costume came to be, hear her version of how she and Emp became friends, and even get some great backstory on F\*\*king Oyuki-chan. Overall "Nine Beers with Ninjette" is defined by the honesty that I think makes Empowered so special. How often do we get to see female friendships as both fluffy fun and lifesaving oases or heroes really acknowledging their flaws or women flat out admitting that they actually get horny from time to time. Especially in this collection, the distinct tone of this tale gives it some extra oomph. Of course it helps that Takeshi Miyazawa is our artist. Miyazawa's art is obviously suitable for this story of a New Jersey ninja and the starkness of its black and white helps keep the focus on the storytelling. There's both a joy and a youth to Miyazawa's style that is pretty perfect for this particular story. Miyazawa does some especially great work with Ninjette's hair and costume, using them to help convey very precise feelings of motion. I also can't neglect how great 'Jette's supporting cast look. While Oyuki's stark white color scheme summons up something more in the vein of Rei Ayanami than the dark-skinned kunoichi we met in Empowered vol. 5, Oyuki-chan looks really cool and very distinct, giving her a special vibe throughout the story. Likewise, the choice to never fully reveal Ninjette's father gives him a special eeriness when

combined with Miyazawa's pencils. Almost oni-like in his physique, 'jette's "otō-sama" radiates power, misogyny, and control. It's an impressive bit of visual shorthand. I've actually already reviewed the final story in this collection, Internal Medicine, so, in the name of keeping this massive review from growing even further, I'll direct you to that article. As a collection, the stories have a nice flow and will certainly look better on the shelf than a spattering of small one-offs. It would have been nice if there had been some mention of when the various stories were released. It's not hard to place them really, but having the added context from the get go might have been helpful when some stories are still heavily referencing the events of Emp vol. 4 and others were published after vol. 8. There is also a small selection of extras included in the back of the book. It's pretty cool but getting one page of sketches per story doesn't feel like all that much of a bonus. It's mostly included to ensure that trade readers get the full experience that early adopters got and, in that respect, I suppose it's quite nice of Warren and Dark Horse. The post Empowered Unchained Vol. 1 appeared first on Weekly Comic Book Review.

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