

Somewhere in college I stopped reading webcomics. Not completely, of course, but a switch definitely turned and it became a rarer and rarer occurrence. That's strange because around the same time I started picking up monthly comics. The two formats obviously have their differences, one catering to the inventiveness of limitation and the other indulging freedom to resounding highs and lows. Nonetheless, they're largely the same and crossovers between the two are almost inevitable. Enter Strong Female Protagonist. I am no longer an authority, but this is one of the best web comics I've ever read. I found and finished the archives in one day and now, some months later, Top Shelf has done the world a favor and put this story into print. SFP is the story of Alison Green, one of the first wave biodynamic individuals to appear on our planet. At age fourteen, Alison's powers activated and, before long, she was Mega Girl: the strongest human on the planet. She's super strong, invulnerable, and utterly powerless to make the world any better. And so she hung up the cape and did the only thing she could think of that would take her closer to her dream of truth, justice and the American way: she went to a liberal arts college. It sounds like a brilliant set up for a comedy, but SFP is a true cape story and a good one, at that. Free from the mess of an interconnected line of superhero comics, Strong Female Protagonist examines what it really means to be a hero and what it's like to be called one when you know you're not really making a difference. Brennan Lee Mulligan accomplishes an incredible feat in this series by writing a comic about social justice that is almost completely free from judgement. SFP's understanding of the world is uninterested with what fad diet to will solve your problems or which groups are still acceptable targets or who is responsible for corrupting our world. Instead the ethos of the comic is a refreshingly honest admission of being overwhelmed. If fixing the world was easy it would have been done and the only symbol of wisdom is knowing you're a fool. The series rides the line between a character-driven story and taking advantage of the opportunities that exploring this version of the world presents. Indeed, Mulligan's universe feels extremely thought out, without becoming stiff. There's certainly some truth to the stereotype of the overzealous first epic, I'm sure many of us have made that mistake before, but Strong Female Protagonist, for the most part, manages to give the audience all the information they need without lingering on irrelevant detail. Patrick stands out as one of the most interesting characters, as Mulligan finds interesting wrinkles in his psychic powers and reminds us why many of the greatest super villains out there - Doctor Doom, Magneto, Lex Luthor, Ra's al Ghul, etc. - tend to have goals that aren't strictly self-serving. A fine example of Mulligan's tact and restraint is the way that he makes Menace the smartest guy in the room (world?) without him becoming obnoxious. One notable structural flaw, however, is the relative unimportance of Alison's studies. Top Shelf's description of the series, as well as my own above, mention Alison's giving up the superhero life to become a student, but there really isn't a lot of student-ing in these stories. This is lampshaded in a way, but it still feels odd. Some readers might also find the stories a little slow. There's not a whole lot of action, save for Chapter 2. This really is a story about a retired superhero. Still a good superhero fight is an attempt to engage with important issues of right and wrong in a visually interesting way and, at least personally, SFP more than kept my attention. Of course, it's much easier to create full and interesting conflicts when an issue can be as long as you like and the explicit addition of the alt-text is an occasional reminder of what didn't make it from the author's mind onto the page. It's also a bit odd how many of the characters introduced, particularly in early stories, don't reappear. For all its depth, this volume really is mostly setting up the status quo. While we don't get much movement on the greater plot, Chapters 2 & 3 are masterful. These are stories you can really get attached to. Alison's realization at the end of Chapter 2 is powerful stuff.

Admittedly characters don't tend to break out of the archetypes to which they've been written, but they often reconstruct them. SFP doesn't talk down to it's readers. Chapter 3 presents a fascinating moral question and, though Alison rightly points out the flaws in the opposing argument, she has clear blind spots of her own. It's an indictment of the limitations of modern liberalism as much as it is a celebration of people doing the work that needs to be done. Most of all, Strong Female Protagonist doesn't offer easy answers. I expect that many, especially readers around Alison's age, will find the honesty of the book and its themes of not knowing how to do right to be highly resonant. Like many webcomic artists, Molly Ostertag's art evolves considerably throughout the book. It's very difficult to talk about the art in this collection as a whole, as it changes so much. There's no denying that she lacks the experience that a mainstream comic artist possesses, for obvious reasons. Nonetheless, while this can lead to some interesting experimentation, at the core, Ostertag gets narrative storytelling and has a firm handle of the needs of the page. Admittedly Professor Cohen's head looks more than a little unnatural if you take a moment to look at it and there are some anatomy problems here and there, but, particularly as the style becomes rounder and more uniform in Chapters 3 & 4, these issues appear less and less. While I suppose I understand those who aren't interested in seeing the artist Ostertag can or will be, the crucial, small moments are all there and, once established, the book's aesthetic is rather lovely. Ostertag has a surprising ability to bring both simplicity and complexity to her work. The panels are clear and legible but often full of detail. It's also worth mentioning that Ostertag obviously sees the world complexly. Her characters will be familiar to those who run in the social circles they do and they're varied enough to present a world that feels real, for all its superhero excess. The one other thing I'd mention is that the retention of the alt-text occasionally clashes with the tone of the page. It's one thing to have that commentary scurried away behind the page, for if you want it, but it sometimes feels intrusive. Basically it's clear that this was not the intended format for the commentary and, occasionally, the translation falls short. The post Strong Female Protagonist: Book One appeared first on Weekly Comic Book Review.

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