

Art and the Ambitious Amateur: Katie Bent's "After the Fact"

"After the Fact," the half-completed debut work from amateur manga artist Katie Bent, crams an awful lot into a very small space. This is true both of the art, which sometimes overreaches itself in visual density, and of the narration – the overall story spans fifteen years, yet the completed comic is takes up a mere twenty-four pages, divided into four six-page "episodes" that purport to present one scene every five narrative years. While this ambitious temporal scope does help the story establish its emotional gravity, Bent struggles to keep the comic appropriately focused, resulting in two principal negative consequences: one, an unfortunate sense of hurry within the main story, and two, an abundance of unanswered questions at the manga's periphery. Despite numerous errors in technical execution, though, the work does present an interesting story in an occasionally visually interesting way. For a first attempt at creative participation in an unfamiliar medium, "After the Fact" is a valiant effort.

One of Bent's more effective ways of guiding the reader through the story's potentially disorienting timeline is her use of thematically linked title pages at the start of each episode. While the manga itself has no title page just yet (it is, after all, a work in progress), each chapter begins with a splash page that seems to serve three important functions. First, it explicitly names the episode's place in the sequence with a Roman numeral (I, II, III or IV) and Lian (the protagonist)'s age with an Arabic numeral (3, 8, 13 or 18). Second, it establishes Lian's vantage point; as she ages and gets taller, the visual perspective from which the reader views the items on the title page follows her growth, letting the reader situate her in space by seeing out of her eyes. Finally, the slow visual zoom executed in the progression of the splash pages – from table to

tabletop to photo frame to photo corner – mirrors Lian’s own gradual struggle to learn about and make peace with her father’s history. These images may not be particularly beautiful or expressive in and of themselves, but they form the structure on which the story hangs, providing necessary temporal clarification and a greater sense of narrative cohesion to the overall work.

The title pages alone, though, are not enough to compensate for some of the more confusing elements of the manga or to guarantee the reader’s smooth comprehension of the story. One of these problem areas is the abundance of nameless side characters, particularly in the first episode: the first character to appear, who seems to be Lian’s caretaker for the entire chapter, is given neither a name, a relation to Lian, nor a second appearance, omissions that leave her presence in the manga entirely unexplained. According to the author, she is Lian’s grandmother, but this is impossible to garner from the source material alone, especially given that her visual representation seems far too young for such a role. It seems much more likely that readers would understand her as Lian’s mother, an interpretation that is unfortunately not contradicted anywhere else in the manga, though it is not endorsed either. Other background characters are drawn with some care but remain likewise nameless, leaving the reader confused as to their importance to the story; in fact, of the ten characters presented in the first episode, only half ever actually appear in later episodes. This failure to empathize with an unfamiliar reader’s struggle to identify the key players in the narrative ballgame is especially critical in such a short comic – a twenty-four page manga cannot sustain a cast of ten without seriously sacrificing depth of characterization, and when readers are distracted with the task of determining which characters they are supposed to be recognizing and which are strangers, the story loses the focus it must maintain to succeed in such a short space.

Small visual inconsistencies also distract from the underlying narrative, making it difficult for readers to understand what is happening from page to page. Visual representations of different age groups seem to pose a particular challenge for Bent, with Lian's so-called grandmother as the first of many examples. Lian herself often changes appearance from panel to panel; some of her depictions at age eight are indistinguishable from her depictions at age thirteen, particularly given Bent's failure to develop a distinctive wardrobe for her at any age. Conversely, Lian's father Ray also seems not to change appearance between episodes apart from arbitrary reimaginings of his facial hair, even though within the second episode his depiction is inconsistent even between panels. These are not the only visual complications weighing down "After the Fact," though. Some of the visual mock-ups in the outlines for the uncompleted third and fourth episodes are messy to the point of incomprehensibility, rendering them practically useless as narrative tools, and some shoddily drawn props (particularly in the second episode) raise more questions about the setting of a scene than they answer.

The greatest disappointment of the manga, though, is that after three episodes in which the storytelling relies much more on the visual than on the verbal, the emotional climax of "After the Fact" is presented entirely in words. While it makes narrative sense for Lian to learn of her father's previous love for a man through an old letter, the impact of the scene suffers greatly when Bent chooses to represent that letter literally. Manga's power rests in its union of words and images, but a drawing of a letter can hardly be considered an image, and the fleeting glimpses of Lian's face as she reads are not enough to sustain the emotional momentum of the story. Here, the manga is perfectly clear in its meaning, but the impact is lost when it abandons creative representational techniques in favor of a trite, word-heavy unraveling of the story's mystery.

On the other hand, this is an easy mistake to make. The text of the letter does matter, and given Lian's ignorance of Cal, the letter's author, and the strong link between her gaze and the reader's perspective, it would make little sense images of him (presumably from Ray's memory) to accompany Lian's reading of his letter. A more drastic overhaul of the storytelling seems in order, then.

But despite these setbacks, Bent succeeds for the most part in conveying the main points of the narrative and in preserving the story's essential suspense. Like the smudged graphite used to create its images, "After the Fact" is not a totally clean read. It contains its fair share of narrative inconsistencies and confusing artistic tics, but the tale at its core is a winning one that examines an unorthodox romantic love story through the underutilized lens of familial love. On an artistic level, some of its images – particularly close-ups of adult characters' faces – are unexpectedly poignant, a payoff from Bent's meticulous attention to detail. It is far from a masterwork, but with an extension in length and a wise, nitpicky editor, "After the Fact" has the potential to become a truly gripping story of love, loss and the many forms they take.