

Ninja Frosh

In this humor comic by Alex Eustis, the unnamed protagonist, referred to as "Ninja Frosh," is a freshman in college, but simultaneously pretends to be a ninja. In an attempt to bring his fantasy into reality, he goes about his day wearing a hooded sweatshirt and a turtleneck pulled up over his face, as though it were a ninja cloak. In so many words, this comic is about the daily antics of a quirky individual who is either oblivious to, or unconcerned with, the amused responses of his peers.

However, it isn't just another painful-to-read Shonen comic about a clueless boy who tries desperately and fruitlessly to get a date, but just ends up humiliating himself over and over. "Ninja Frosh" intends to go beyond all that, so that you will laugh with the characters, not at them. The story sympathizes somewhat with Ninja Frosh's bizarre little obsession, showing us glimpses of his overactive imagination. In these sequences we have an appropriate setting (something resembling feudal Japan) and an appropriately badass likeness of the main character, so that somehow it all seems okay. At other times, he is depicted how others see him, running around in his ridiculous ninja garb, and his humorous/humiliating plights become the subject of the story. In this way, the comic becomes an interesting blend of a Shonen "college student" story with a Shonen ninja story.

This very combination will probably come off as bizarre to most people. Ultimately, we can only say that it will work for some readers and not for others. When the main character is fighting in an epic battle in one panel, then getting yelled at by his roommate in the next, what are we to make of it? If you're really into action stories, you might be disappointed because the fantasy world doesn't follow a continuous plotline. It is rather disjointed and random, being thrown together from fantasized versions of events in Ninja Frosh's everyday life. Those looking for an authentic (or even a logically coherent) samurai drama aren't going to find one in "Ninja Frosh." On the other hand, that's probably a good thing because at least Ninja Frosh is sane enough to have his real life driving his fantasy and not the other way around. The author is attempting to portray the character's daydreams as they would be in real life: liable to start, stop, or be interrupted at any moment, and sometimes picking up where they left off but not necessarily so.

"Ninja Frosh" is clearly a parody of the typical Shonen style, especially in the way that the characters (especially the title character) periodically shout out the names of their "secret techniques." Also, we can see that Ninja Frosh indulges a manga-style fantasy in which he has superhuman agility, stealth, etc., but in real life he is a "lovable buffoon:" error-prone, forgetful, and generally the subject of much ridicule. However, the parody is an amiable rather than a hostile one. This is reflected by the story itself, because the characters who poke fun at Ninja Frosh are not at all cruel, and deep down they even seem to accept his strange ways. In this way, the story aims for an overall positive attitude, at risk of

becoming cheesy. One could even say it's a comic about friendship and tolerance, which uses humor to establish the mood. Ultimately it's up to the reader whether or not they can stomach all that happiness. It's also possible that the author will explore more negative themes in future volumes, similar to what was done in the "Harry Potter" series.

Like any humor comic, the characters are drawn in a caricatured way: they have disproportionately sized heads, exaggerated features, and are sometimes even drawn without noses, ears, etc. What makes art style of "Ninja Frosh" a little different are the fantasy sequences, which are (rather paradoxically) drawn in a more realistic style. This adds a welcome element of contrast and leads to some interesting page layouts, but perhaps contributes to the reader's confusion at the same time. For instance, the very first page of the comic begins with a fantasy sequence, which depicts a spin-off of the computer game that Ninja Frosh is currently engrossed in, and behind the backdrop for the scene is NF's dormroom, where he's shouting secret techniques at his computer. So there are in fact three intertwined worlds here: the dorm room, the computer game world, and NF's imagination. The latter is interacting with the videogame world but not participating in it directly, as Ninja Frosh prefers his own alternate setting for the game. If the reader manages to comprehend all this from the one page, then great; but undoubtedly it will just leave some readers confused and guessing.

In conclusion, "Ninja Frosh" has a number of characteristics, especially its dual fantasy/reality setting, that make it an interesting read and that allow it to go beyond pure slapstick humor. At the same time, it may not exactly qualify as the

type of thing that many readers expect a humor comic to be. And for all that the comic tries to accomplish, the characters may still come off as a little bit corny and two-dimensional. But it is still a humor comic after all; it's primarily meant to be enjoyed, not to make overly deep statements about the human condition.

Even if the characters annoy you a little, the comic is still doing its job as long as it's fun to read about them.