

E.M. Mystery Club: The New ‘Magical Girls’ On The Block

E.M. Girls’ High School Mystery Club, which has released concept art, a plot trajectory, and one short chapter, bills itself as a mix between the supernatural adventures present in boys’ manga such as Death Note and Bleach, and the friendship-centric, magical adventures of girls’ media such as Pretty Cure and Sailor Moon. E.M.’s first chapter, which introduces the shy, seemingly average protagonist, Lee Subin, and features brief appearances from the supporting cast, definitely has the mood of a more traditional magical girl manga; the “outsider” theme present is a staple of several shojo works. The “shonen” side of the story is much less present in this chapter: a four-armed barista serves Subin, and a mood-establishing panel on the first page depicts a “liver cake”, obviously catering to the diet of the Korean *gumiho*. This tricky balance between the “shonen” and “shojo” sides of the work seems to improve in later chapters, with more even amounts of relationship development and mystery solving, but the series so far maintains a definite preference for tropes and trademarks of girls’ manga. E.M. mixes influences from both genres, but its imbalance of these influences makes it easy to categorize as a shojo manga. With the announcement that the series hopes to have a primarily female readership, this is unsurprising, but it demonstrates that categorizing this series isn’t as difficult as its description might lead you to think.

Though it's easy to designate a *genre* for E.M., it's less easy to answer another question: Just what kind of comic is this? E.M. is written by an American, Katherine Evans, but it reads right to left. It is also influenced by Japanese manga, and set in South Korea with Korean characters. Is it considered a manga, then, because the visual language comes from Japan? Or is it a comic, because it is written in English? Does the setting make it a Korean manhwa? Even if this question itself isn't important, the mix of cultural influences in E.M. won't be uncontroversial. The West has a problematic history of conflating the traditions of separate Asian countries, and combining the visual language of one country with the mythology, setting, and culture of another (particularly given Japan's 40-year colonization of the Korean peninsula) may complicate the future of this series, let alone its reception in the media. For Evans' part, she frequently uses subtle details to affirm the Korean setting: GS25 and Paris Baguette, two ubiquitous Korean chain shops, make an appearance in the first chapter, and the Korean alphabet is used liberally to denote buildings, products, and signs (In one panel, Evans even draws an old spelling test of Subin's, with basic words humorously misspelled.). On the last page, we see Min Yuri drinking from a pentagon-shaped cup, instantly recognizable as Korean banana milk. Descriptions of later chapters feature appearances by mythical creatures unique to Korea as well. These cultural markers are significant, and should the series continue, it should maintain the use of details, and even integrate Korean sound effects and visual language for added effect.

Beyond the questions of categorization and cultural influences, E.M.'s story itself is charming. It has the modest goal of bringing (or beginning to bring) together four

unique girls from different backgrounds through neighborhood mysteries, and the planned story is mostly effective. The ending of the mini-narrative is shocking, with a drastic and perhaps unexpected change in mood—a character receives a near-fatal injury, and is ultimately revealed to be an undercover agent of the supernatural world’s peacekeeping body. It is clear that Evans wanted to bring her “origin story” narrative to a close, but additional chapters (Or, should the series get an animated adaptation, “filler” episodes) would help bring the narrative to a logical conclusion, allow the mood to darken more gradually, and give additional opportunities to flesh out the characters and the world they live in.

The art of E.M. is simple and unrefined, but surprisingly serviceable for an amateur artist. Recognizing the limitations of her own drawing ability, Evans uses shading, eye shape, and hair styles to make her main characters easily distinguishable (Subin is denoted as the main character through the ever-present flush in her cheeks). The punks Subin encounters are given pointed heads and nondescript, square bodies, which, when contrasted with Subin’s round, warm face, clearly denote them as the villains of the chapter. Partially erased lines and the presence of sparkles depict the illusions Subin creates—it’s not a groundbreaking technique, but it conveys the idea clearly. Backgrounds and shading are minimal, and only added when necessary for setting or character development. The inconsistencies with hair length, body size, and proportions are definitely noticeable, but they don’t hinder the flow of the story too much.

Though E.M. definitely follows in the footsteps of other manga and anime series, it does, as Evans wrote in her introduction to the series, combine tropes and ideas from

existing genres and media in a unique manner. Though it remains to be seen how the general public will view this genre and culture mashup, E.M., if nothing else, shows that mixing tropes and conventions could give girls' manga a breath of fresh air while staying true to the genre's core values.

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