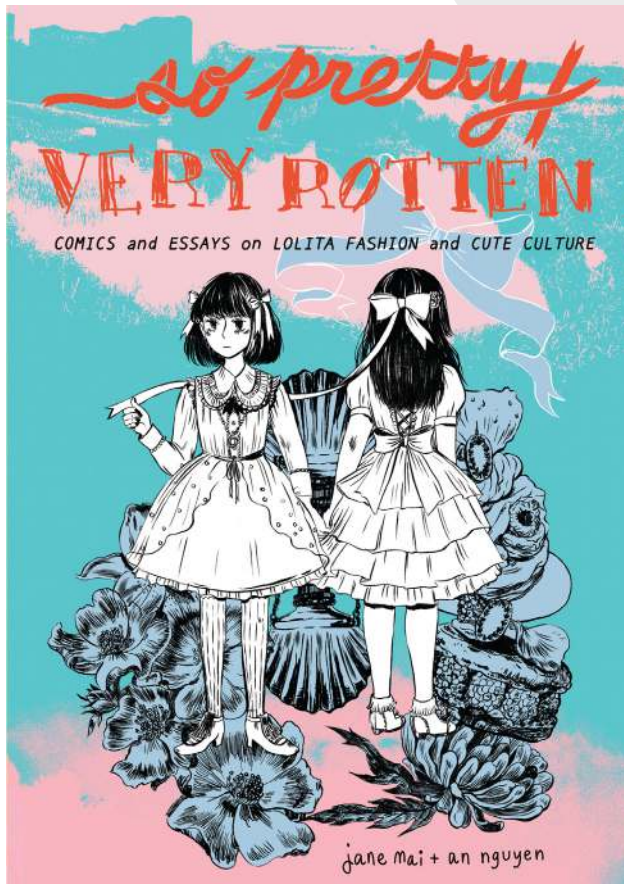


Book Review

Jane Mai and An Nguyen. 2017. *So Pretty/Very Rotten*. Toronto: Koyama Press.

Evelyn Ramiel



So Pretty/Very Rotten, by Jane Mai and An Nguyen. Cover.

When I bought *So Pretty/Very Rotten* at the Toronto Comic Arts Festival in 2018, I was so immediately smitten by the book's text and art, that I soon after attended a panel hosted by authors/illustrators Jane Mai and An Nguyen. In attendance at the panel, were so many people dressed in extravagant Lolita style clothing, that my heart skipped a beat. I had known about Lolita clothes and subculture through watching anime and participating in that realm of the *otaku* subculture, but I had never seen so much beautiful clothing up close. The lace, bows, petticoats, and frills filled my dreams.

I seem to have forgotten my manners, though. To begin, Jane Mai and An Nguyen's *So Pretty/Very Rotten* (2017) is a collection of comics and written pieces which range from interviews and essays to brief snippets of memoir, each narrating and contextualizing the Lolita subculture and style. Lolita is, in their words, "a celebration of femininity, modesty, cuteness, and beauty that does not fit into mainstream fashion trends" (Mai and Nguyen 2017, 13). Originating in urban Japan and especially associated with the street fashion scene of Tokyo's Harajuku neighborhood, Lolita has become an international subculture with devotees of all ages and genders throughout much of the world.

For the most part, the essays in *So Pretty/Very Rotten* present personal perspectives on the many intricacies of this frilly subculture, and especially its thornier problems. The narrative comics inter-

perspersed throughout, delve particularly into the more macabre aspects of wearing and loving the style, often including elements of bodily horror and decay, loneliness, and the emptiness of fanatical investment in consumer subculture. The comics' role in this complex multimedia text is to bring the reader closer to the intimate effects and feelings of what is discussed more dryly in the written portions, and they are very successful at this task. So successful, in fact, that they make me wish more books for adults would include abundant images and comics.

Standing out among the comic short stories, is Jane Mai's "Empty," which follows an envious admirer of Lolita fashion who, after buying a cheap "magic wallet" from a street merchant, finds that the wallet grants her as much money as she desires. Flush with cash, she dedicates her life to buying and wearing opulent Lolita clothing. In her new life, she finds friendship and fulfillment, joining up with a group of Lolita girls she used to envy. As she grows more beautiful, however, her body deteriorates—often in subtly grotesque ways which I will not spoil for the reader. As the character muses to herself: "I'm so tired and weak but I look so cute!" (Mai and Nguyen 2017, 231). So pretty, very rotten indeed!

While "Empty," and Mai's artistic contributions in general, point toward a rather dim view of Lolita as a subject, that perspective never dominates the page. Even in "Empty," Mai draws the clothes in a bold graphic style, which is alluring despite the supernatural decay happening in the story. Taken just on their own, the book's comics manage to fashion a very multi-shaded portrait of Lolita, one as detailed and intricate as the clothes themselves. Any macabre portions of the art or writing are tempered by an affectionate perspective. Crucially, none of the women characters in the book, even if they are posed as cautionary figures, lack intent or strong desires. Though in some cases tragic, the women's downfalls arrive through the pursuit of sublime beauty, which the book ultimately validates, even while counting its costs.

Moreover, Nguyen's comic "Ribbon Army," which comes much earlier in the volume than "Empty," fashions a near-angelic portrait of the power of desire expressed through Lolita. Here the

author/illustrator tells the story of another woman envious of a Lolita she sees on her commute. The forceful and assertive Lolita notices her longing gaze and invites her into The Ribbon Army, an army where clothes become armor and there is, as the Lolita explains, "A kind of power in announcing so plainly the things you like" (2017, 111). A consistent theme of Lolita that the book emphasizes is that Lolita creates femininity for itself and on its own terms, carving out a space for cuteness and self-love through clothes. The immense skirts, detailed in striking patterns and prints and undergirded by blossoming petticoats, make the wearer take up a lot of space and attract every eye. These are clothes of courage, and so the direct comparison to armour is not just apt, but gets to the core of Lolita's appeal. As I will discuss below, this kinship with and trust in objects, forms Lolita's soft core, and its "philosophical" skeleton.

Stepping aside from the comics for a moment,

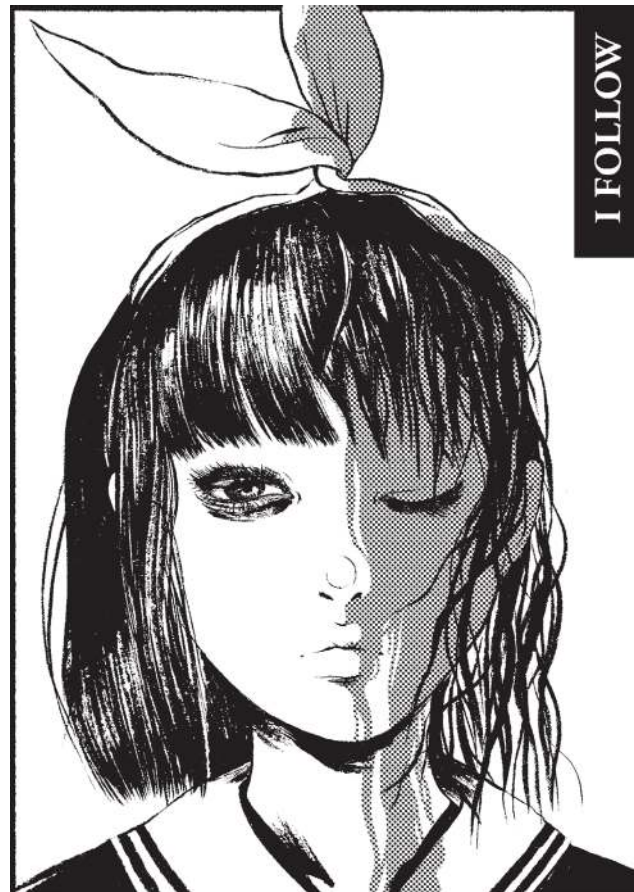


So Pretty/Very Rotten, "Street Fashion Lookbook," drawn by Jane Mai and An Nguyen. Page 19.

we find that this book takes these fundamental Lolita emotions into a wider frame. Especially effective are the essays following the threads of *kawaii* (“cute” but with a much wider application) and *shojo* (girls’) culture, as they bind and decorate the Lolita sensibility. For the authors, *kawaii* most fundamentally designates an attainable perfection or beauty, as well as a method or tool through which Japanese women and girls practice consumption. This practice, which Mai and Nguyen compare to Brian McVeigh’s theory of “resistance consumption,” designates aesthetic preferences outside of traditional ideas of beauty or the sublime (Mai and Nguyen 2017, 167). The authors call Lolita the “material incarnation” of an individualistic resistance to patriarchal control over women’s beauty, in which concepts and sensibilities like *kawaii* and *shojo*, can cohere and find shelter, under the protection of an eternal innocence, relatively inaccessible to patriarchal interference.

To me, this point directly underpins why *kawaii*, *shojo*, and Lolita have more specifically found devotees outside of Japan. It also directly connects to a point made multiple times throughout *So Pretty/Very Rotten*: while Lolita has become international, it has not remained unchanged while in transit. In the West, Lolita is more often concerned with the issues the book calls attention to: the conflict between the fulfillment of having and loving what you want, and the “materialism” of getting happiness through an expensive consumer subculture. According to the essay “Learning from the Clothes: Comparing Lolitas in Japan and North America,” however, Japanese Lolitas appear to be self-reflexive and to undertake a complementary engagement with material things which is rarely questioned consciously (2017, 248).

In my own experience with online Anglo Lolita culture, I have observed that there is truth to the assertion that North American Lolitas are far more anxious about maintaining a sense of individuality while finding community in clothes. I am, however, unsure of whether these anxieties or concerns clue us into the limits of consumer subcultures. Instead, the book seems to suggest that consumption and the objects consumed, create a powerful and malleable space for self-reflection, pleasure, and personal growth. This active and thoughtful relationship to



So Pretty/Very Rotten, “I Follow,” drawn by Jane Mai. Page 31.

fashion and consumer commodities has produced a kind of theory of affective relationships to objects within the Lolita community. In two powerful interviews, the book nudges the reader towards a new awareness of Lolita’s potential significance for studying our bodily relationship with nonhuman objects.

In the first interview, with fashion designer, novelist, and Lolita advocate Novala Takemoto, the dandyish author reflects on his own frustrated efforts to research and publish a complete history of Lolita. His comments about how, in academic establishments, especially in Japan, there is an almost complete resistance to discussing fashion seriously, made me grateful for my ability to publish this review. Takemoto’s comments essentially confirm Lolita’s outsider status, comparing its aesthetics to the act of vandalizing the *Mona Lisa* in order to make it more girlish and disreputable (Mai and Nguyen 2017, 128). I argue that this sensibility finds its way into every corner of the book, espe-

cially its comics, which take a confrontational and often morbid posture.

Most vital to the entire book, however, is a relatively short interview with a Lolita from Japan named Kana. Kana introduces a phrase that I believe gets to the core of Lolita's appeal, in a way that even *kawaii* does not exhaustively describe. She says, "*Yofuku wa watashi no sensei*," meaning, "the outfit is my teacher" (Mai and Nguyen 2017, 248). Understood this way, the clothes pick their wearer just as much as occurs the other way around. While on its face this could sound like the Lolita sacrifices agency or choice to a sense of obligation to the clothes, Kana's words do not skew in that direction. From this line of thought, we can see that the inherent personality or consciousness of the clothes themselves exerts an influence, which determines, as Kana notes, whether one is ready to wear an outfit or not. All things, whether animate or not, coexist and exert an influence on their relationships. To wear clothes that accept you, and to accept the clothes in turn, is more like a friendship than ownership, despite the fact that these exchanges and relationships occur between people and objects, rather than between two people. Indeed, when looking at beautiful clothes, I often swoon at their prices and lament their unattainability, but their beauty, their tangible effects and teaching, are indelible — especially for a tall queer lesbian, whose body so often sticks out in the worst ways.

To fellow academic readers otherwise uninterested in Lolita or fashion, I will simply say that the book provides highly compelling, nuanced, and informed considerations of material culture, the politics of pleasure and consumption, the "agency" of objects, and the ways in which cultural movements and sensibilities shift while "going global," and adapting to the needs of their participants in disparate contexts. To everyone interested in the craft of bookmaking as an academic pursuit, I will recommend this book as an example of how the combination of comic arts, illustrations, essays, and interviews can lend a book power and scope. I hope that others in my craft will see *So Pretty/Very Rotten*, and know that it *is* possible to make thoughtful arguments and beautiful art at the same time.

References

Mai, Jane, and An Nguyen. 2017. *So Pretty/Very Rotten*. Toronto: Koyama Press.