

Blankets

Craig Thompson

Craig Thompson's semi-autobiographical work *Blankets* is something of a contemporary classic in the realm of graphic novels; unfortunately, "the realm of graphic novels" has yet to be truly accepted into the realm of "real literature" (although progress is certainly being made). The book is a brick, weighing in at nearly six hundred pages of heavy paper—despite that, Thompson's elegantly simplistic storytelling and flowing illustrations make this an ideal single-sitting read.

I don't feel much hesitation in laying out the entire plot of *Blankets*: Craig meets a girl. They fall in love fast. They fall out of love faster. The minimalistic story cannot be "spoiled," because it honestly does not matter. *Blankets* is all about...not feelings, but *feeling*. The ache of raw emotion. The cravings of childhood, and the craving to return to it. Nostalgia. Naiveté. Longing. Thompson's work is a fishhook in the soul, dredging up the wonder and the weariness of first love that some of us have all but forgotten. It is the cathartic agony that only art can provide.

The overriding theme of the novel is not subtle: religion versus humanity. Craig is raised in a conservative Christian household, and the concepts of heaven and hell root themselves deeply in his mind. He becomes obsessed with purity, with sanctity, to the point where the promise of eternal happiness and threat of eternal pain becomes an albatross around his neck. It shackles him, locking him away from the needs and desires that arrive inevitably in the process of growing up; art is worthless unless devoted to God, masturbation is sinful, and desiring a woman is enough to send him spiraling into a confused reevaluation of his entire worldview.

His greatest challenge comes, then, when he meets the beautiful Raina at church camp. *Blankets* is so mired in Craig's perspective that it is hard not to see her as he does: an outlier, an angel, someone sacred and mysterious and unearthly. It is easy and tempting to dismiss Raina as a cliché, the perfect-in-every-way girl that we've seen in countless movies and shows and books. But she's not. Thompson the writer lets her have moments of paradox, teasing the reader with what Thompson the character cannot see: her humanity. Her flawless skin breaks out in acne. She says she believes in God, but not in heaven (reflecting a barely-hinted-at undercurrent of cynicism that greatly enriches her character). And in one of my favorite scenes, she brings Craig to her school—where he realizes, in a bubble-breaking moment of shock and disappointment, how worldly, and how unlike him, she truly is.

"I don't get it," he says. "You're *popular*."

Raina is just enough of a rebel to lure Craig out of the cage in which he has locked himself, but it is this same humanity which plants the seeds that will drive them apart. It is incomprehensible to him that she drinks, that she parties, that she flirts and teases and, most of all, *wants*. Craig does not yet understand that it is possible to be a good person without being a "good Christian." Nor

does Raina understand that she needs more than to be worshipped; she needs to be treated not as an angel, but as a person. In the midst of their relationship, neither of them understand. But as their relationship ends, they begin to. Therein lies tragedy, and therein lies life.

Thompson's art also deserves a mention, given that the story of *Blankets* is told more through pictures than it is through words. His sweeping lines draw the eye around and across the page, both gentle and irresistible. While the illustrations are primarily anchored in the real world, Craig's inner paranoia occasionally seeps through in flashes of surrealistic imagery—feathered angels that cradle him, craggy demons that claw at his ankles, a car tumbling from a truncated road and into a clouded abyss during a moment of heartbreak. Thompson slips in and out of these scenes seamlessly.

Blankets is, in many ways, a love letter to Midwestern winters (Craig grows up in Wisconsin, and the majority of the novel takes place in Michigan). The title refers not only to blankets of cloth, but to blankets of snow—soft white sheets that hide the barren brown dirt and hard edges of the world. There is a comfort in the cold. But that comfort is stamped with an inherent temporality; snows melt, friends leave, relationships end. Our blankets are taken from us, and suddenly, as Thompson puts it, “nothing fits together.” We are left with memories, with wisdom, and the seasonal promise that, in time, snow will fall again.

Both sweet and subtly challenging, *Blankets* has earned its place in the upper echelon of modern graphic novels; it is a beautiful introduction to the medium for those who have never tried it, and a must-read for those who have. Set aside an evening, settle in with hot chocolate and (you kind of have to) a blanket, and experience art and storytelling at its finest. Thompson's work is a literary comfort that you won't soon forget.

Reviewed by Aaron Larson