

GUNNERKRIGG COURT

By: Tom Siddell (writer/author)

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Stories don't really have to be original to be any good. For all that originality gets lionized in Western (especially American) culture, it doesn't mean shit if your original story isn't any good in the first place.

Gunnerkrigg Court comes from the long, storied line of British boarding school stories. Obviously, everybody on the fucking planet knows about Harry Potter at this rate, but the magical/mysterious boarding school is a fairly standard setting for children's stories in the UK. It's not hard to see why; being sent off to a strange school away from your parents is a pretty life-changing experience, thus setting up for the classic coming-of-age story, and it's an easily recognizable setting even if you don't happen to go to a boarding school.

Thus, the comic is set at the titular academy Gunnerkrigg Court, a massive, technologically advanced facility sporting robots and all a manner of enigmatic devices, housed in the center of a vast, sprawling wood full of its own mysteries and full of mythological creatures such as faeries and, for some reason, the Native American trickster god Coyote. If this sounds like the usual nature vs. technology, logic vs. spirituality dichotomy, it certainly looks that way at the moment, with the forest dwellers banning technology on their premises, and the Court dismissing the magic of the forest due to it being unexplainable by scientific means.

But I'm not here to simply point out every trope that *Gunnerkrigg Court* happens to utilize. I'm here to talk about the comic's general quality.

First, there's the art. Currently, the art is rather nice. Siddell makes very effective use of color, composition, framing, and other devices to give his pages a dynamic, somewhat storybookish feel. The character designs are solid, he varies up viewing angles considerably so that the strip doesn't fall into a "talking heads" trap, and he tends to convey action quite well.

Of course, the art wasn't always like this. Honestly, the first several chapters of the comic are rather difficult to look at. While Siddell's penchant for drawing interesting settings and creatures seems to have been there from the get-go, his early character designs are absolutely godawful. Annie, the main character, looks like a bastard hybrid of a Bratz doll and Arnold from *Hey Arnold*, Kat looks turtle-faced, and in general the designs of the children are misshapen and often hideous. The fact that he's progressed from this is commendable and very-much appreciated.

That's not to say that Siddell doesn't still have some kinks in his art. His portrayals of muscular, well-built characters such as Mr. Eglamore seem wonky, as if he's somewhat unsure of how to accurately convey their anatomy/proportions, and some of his perspective shots are still a tad off, but these are really just nitpicks given how far he's come.

Now if the strip's art takes a while to improve, the writing has fewer problems. With what I described earlier as a sort of backdrop (revealed bit by bit as the comic has progressed), the main thrust of the story focuses on Antimony Carver (a.k.a. Annie), a young girl who joins the titular court halfway through its first year. Her background itself is fairly steeped in clichés—her mother is dead, her father is mysteriously absent, she happens to have unusual powers—but Siddell manages to keep the pacing fairly steady so that none of it really feels tedious or dull. Along the way, she befriends scientific genius

Kat and, as the story progresses, begins to unravel the mysteries behind both the Court and the forest that surrounds it.

Admittedly, the first few chapters feel a bit meandering and seem to not really go anywhere; they're charming, yes, but not much more than that. Once Siddell starts to get into the mythology behind the Court and its surroundings and the background of Annie and related characters, the story picks up quite a bit, with an early standout being Chapter 6.

Throughout, Siddell shows a talent for balancing the dramatic with the humorous. Alongside important revelations about Annie's parents and the dangerous situations that Annie often finds herself in (such as the cliffhanger ending of Chapter 7), we have goofier, more light-hearted fare like a chapter dedicated entirely to the robots that populate the Court, or a simple story about just getting a haircut. There's not many dead spots, and it's all generally relevant to the overall story in some way or another.

The main focus, really, seems to be on the relationship between Annie and Kat. It's kind of a classic duo: Annie is rather reserved and serious, while Kat tends toward the outgoing and enthusiastic. There's a reason why this sort of pairup exists in fiction, though; it works. The relationship between the two never seems forced, and honestly becomes quite endearing as the comic goes on.

The large supporting cast also deserves note. While some characters, honestly, haven't been very well-developed (Willie, for instance, really hasn't been seen much outside of being kind of a jerky kid), others are quite intriguing, such as the alternate duo of Zimmy and Gamma, with the former being a very enigmatic, troubled girl and Gamma serving as sort of her anchor for reality/sanity. This is to say nothing of the mythological and mechanical curiosities that have made appearances too, most especially the demon fox Reynardine, a bizarre character currently under the control of Annie due to an unusual set of circumstances.

For all this, one of my only concerns for it is its pacing. Story-based webcomics in general tend to have a problem with keeping interest up over the short term; the balance between advancing the story in a meaningful way and showing something interesting every update is a hard one to pull off. As much as the strip makes for a fascinating read over the course of a day or two's reading of its archives, on a day to day basis it's a bit harder to stick with. If you really like fantasy stories, even if they seem geared toward a younger crowd, this is likely one to stick with, though I personally will probably only make this a monthly read, simply so I can get a large portion of the story at once.