

RAINE DOG:

By: D.C. Simpson (writer/author)

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When are people who make message comics going to realize that parading the message around with fireworks and streamers and the whole god damned parade is obnoxious and off-putting? All you're really doing is targeting people who already agree with your viewpoint while driving off fence-sitters because your comic, due to focusing so much on its message, is a mediocre pile of horeshit that doesn't have compelling characters or much of a plot.

To digress for a bit, let's compare *To Kill a Mockingbird* and *Crash*(1). *To Kill a Mockingbird* has a compelling story and fascinating characters, which when combined happen to also convey a point about racism (read: it's bad). *Crash* has a rotating cast of one-dimensional dopes that do nothing but talk about racism in every single line of dialogue, beating you over the head with the point that, well what do you know, racism is bad. The former assumes that people want a good story above all else and that a moral message can be conveyed through a good story; the latter makes the mistake of thinking that all people really want is to be preached at for nearly 2 hours.

Thus we come across *Raine Dog*, yet another in a long line of works whose incessantly repeated message is "hey, we really ought to respect those that are different from us and treat them like human beings!" It's not that the message is laughable or stupid, it's that it's been done so often that it's a goddamned cliché at this point. I mean, Christ, even every other Saturday morning cartoon in existence feels the need to shoehorn this message into at least one episode.

But maybe I'm just being a cynical motherfucker. Perhaps I should commend them for at least trying to bring across a positive message. But god damn it, from my perspective, the story is king, and if you don't have a good story, then it doesn't really matter what the fucking message is because my interest won't be captured.

So anyway, *Raine Dog*.

Let's talk about the art for a moment, since that's the best thing this strip has going for it. If nothing else, Simpson seems to have a fair amount of talent for her art; it's clean, it's generally expressive, and it's fairly appealing, which already puts it above at least 90% of what's on the web. Her choice to use a color palette of black, white, and blue is also interesting, if nothing else, and she uses blue quite well as an accent color. At times, she even manages to quite adeptly use color to establish mood, which isn't really easy with a three-color palette (mostly true at the beginning of its Chapter 6).

But when I say her comic has good art, I mainly am saying that it has fitting art, not necessarily that she's really a good artist. Proportions seem to sometimes get a bit mangled, which isn't cartoonish exaggeration as much as it is simply not paying attention. More problematic is Simpson's portrayals of the strip's main human character thus far, Jeff. It seems apparent that Simpson is a lot more used to drawing cartoony characters, especially furies(2), than actual human beings. As a result, some of Jeff's anatomy gets pretty wonky, especially his face which, at times, less resembles a human boy and more a particularly ugly Muppet. This is probably partially why we never see Jeff's parents in anything but profile (when, surely, they must have had some role in Raine's life) and why the only other human character whose face we actually see is a generic coffee-shop girl(3).

Really, her most recent update as of this writing, a digital painting of the Raine Dog character, definitely shows that she definitely needs work. As far as I can tell, it seems like Simpson spent hours getting the texture of Raine's fur *just so*, then slapped on the facial features in MS Paint as sort of an afterthought. Then there's the fact that Raine has a navel. I mean, even given that Raine is supposed to be a talking cartoon dog, *dogs don't have human-styled navels. At all.* This artistic blunder actually sets up the main problem with the plot of *Raine Dog*, which I'll get to shortly.

Though *Raine Dog* has only been active for around 5 months, it seems pretty apparent what the plot is; Raine is an activist for canine rights, showing that dogs shouldn't be treated as second-class citizens and ought to be given the due respect they deserve from the general population. Replace “dogs” with, say, “blacks” or “Asians” or “gays” and guess what, we've heard this story about fifty times already because that's exactly what Simpson is trying to do here. In this case, it seems likely that the dogs are meant as a stand-in for transgendered folk, since Dana Claire Simpson used to be David Craig Simpson even as recently as a few years ago.

The transgendered admittedly have a really hard time of things, so a comic that tries to address the hardships that transgendered people go through would presumably be a good thing, right? Well it probably would be if the plot of *Raine Dog* were actually worth a damn.

The thing is, by having a dog be analogous to the transgendered (or blacks, or gays, or whatever), it makes the story really, really generic. Yes, having dogs represent second-class citizens might be really clever symbolism if you're, like, in middle school, but it doesn't allow for anything but the most generic and tepid of conflicts, wherein The Man or The Intolerant or Society puts you down, maaaaan. So far, all of the conflict that's been presented in the comic is the coffee-shop girl calling Raine “girl” and a really surreal sequence involving Jeff's parents that I'll deconstruct in more detail later.

The story, what little there has been of it, has been setting up the premise (including very clumsy foreshadowing during the first chapter, which essentially overplays Simpson's hand and reveals damned near everything that's likely to happen in the comic), Raine dog's idyllic early life, and her getting kicked out of her home in a really ridiculous goddamned series of events (again, that's coming later). One could argue that, for updating twice weekly since the middle of January, that's not so bad, but Simpson hasn't really revealed what, exactly, makes Raine so special as a protagonist. The fact that she speaks English and can read isn't really all that special considering how long funny animal characters and/or furies have been around, but that literally seems to be what makes her unique and noteworthy here. You can't reinvent the wheel by showing us something that's been done millions of times before.

Even then, the story likely would progress better if Simpson wouldn't take the time out every other chapter to shove The Message down our throats. Right from the very first page, she starts dishing out the message that dogs are similar to people and ought to be respected, something she repeatedly does throughout the course of the comic, stopping the action to elbow us in the ribs and say “GET THE POINT YET?” This is especially egregious in Chapter 5, where, without prompting and without, you know, incorporating it into the overall plot, Raine (in this instance very obviously standing in for the author) goes on about religion being used to justify oppression. It's not like it isn't true, but wouldn't it have been a good idea to, you know, work this into the main narrative instead of a smug rant? Even then, Simpson completely pisses on her point by then alleging that the reason people oppress those that are different from them is out of jealousy. Yes, apparently if you're racist against blacks, it's because *you secretly wish you were a black person.*

This just leads to my main point; having Raine be a literal dog *doesn't fucking work.* Yes, I understand

metaphor. I understand allegory. I've read *Maus*. The thing of it is, metaphor only works if you have a good metaphor to begin with. There has to be a *reason* for Raine to be a dog and not just a straight-up transgendered person. As D.C. Simpson's artistic slip-up by giving Raine a navel shows, Simpson seems to want to straight-up treat Raine as a 1:1 human stand-in. She's not utilizing the standard human perception as dogs as a blindly loyal, subservient best friend to challenge our assumptions about the transgendered, she just wants Raine to be a dog just because she's a furry artist and that's what furries do. I mean, shit, she has Raine order chai at one point which is completely asinine since caffeine is *straight-up dog poison*. I'm not even really going to get into the "buying estrogen pills" thing since that's just further proof that Raine dog is supposed to just be D.C. Simpson except as a dog.

Still, if the story really were about D.C. Simpson as a person, that would be preferable to having her as a dog, because having Raine be a dog results in some very awkward and strange moments in this story's plot, especially with regards to the seeming (and also rather poorly developed) love story that transpires between Jeff and Raine. Innocent love with The Other is certainly a common trope in this sort of story, since it introduces some really handy instant conflict when the powers that be decide that the love is wrong and attempt to stop the love at all costs. But let me remind you again; Jeff is a human boy. Raine is a dog.

A dog that happens to make bedroom eyes at Jeff, hold Jeff's hand, and ends up making weird sexual allusions before Jeff makes out with her.

Now maybe D.C. Simpson is very brazenly trying to challenge our assumptions and beliefs here and say that, just as we are made uncomfortable by a dog and a boy making out, so people are often made uncomfortable by the transgendered in general. However, that strikes me as bullshit; she probably, in applying the standard story formula about racism/discrimination to her comic, kind of failed to realize that most people would be profoundly grossed out by this and just jump to the conclusion that she seems to be advocating bestiality.

The bestiality angle also comes in even stronger with the wildly unrealistic action that Jeff's parents take. Now, Jeff's parents are already pretty poorly defined by the story. Presumably, they take care of Raine just as much as Jeff and have positive interactions with the dog, but all we are allowed to see them as are shadowy authority figures that do little to serve as arbiters of punishment, thus setting them up rather ridiculously as the bad guys (I mean, Jesus Christ, didn't Jeff's parents buy Raine for Jeff in the first place?)

Let's for a second assume that you are a parent(4). It's time to wake up and go to work. Upon waking, you go into your son's room to wake him for school, and you find that the dog has somehow made its way inside and your son is currently making out with it. What Do You Do?

- A) Have a long talk with your son about how being romantically entangled with a dog may not exactly be the best thing in the world, possibly seek outside assistance from a mental health professional
- B) Punish the boy soundly and thoroughly for being a disgrace and take the dog away to ensure that this doesn't happen again
- C) Throw the brazen hussy dog into the pound because it's clearly the dog's fault. Oh, and spay the dog so that it doesn't somehow magically get pregnant from human male saliva.

Here's a hint: two of those above choices could potentially happen in the real world while the third is just bugshit crazy. Spaying the dog doesn't seem to have any justification other than to make Raine a closer cypher for the author by way of forcing Raine to take estrogen pills, and to also establish conflict in the most over-the-top and melodramatic way imaginable. There's not even any real buildup for the

parents throwing Raine out; one second, life seems fine, while the next Raine is being chucked out simply because the plot demands it.

Granted, the comic has just started, but I really don't see the strip improving much from where it currently stands. The back and forth narrative structure of switching from Raine's heavily-narrated past (where she doesn't even allow you to draw your own conclusions about her life and simply tells you what you're supposed to think) to the present (where Raine can just tell you *directly* what you're supposed to think) doesn't work, the message is heavy-handed and awkward, and, well, *Maus* this isn't. If Simpson had tried a straight-up autobio comic or decided to focus on the facts of Raine's life without stopping to tell us every five seconds what the moral of the story is, maybe it would turn out better. As it stands, though, it's a preachy comic with a cliched message that doesn't even have good enough artwork to let me ignore that fact.

- (1) The Oscar-winning one, not the more entertaining one about car crash fetishists.
- (2) Prior to Raine Dog, Simpson drew the comic Ozy and Millie for over a decade, and while that strip was a pretty tolerable Calvin and Hobbes meets Bloom County ripoff, it's not like that strip ever featured human characters.
- (3) Discounting the general during the Laika sequence since he's obviously meant to be a caricature
- (4) Which, if you're reading a blog about *comics on the internet*, you're probably not.