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INTERVIEW



Fighting for queerness, justice, and the Persian way: an interview with Sina Grace

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Valentino Zullo: Can we start with the fact that you are a Persian comics creator? I noticed that when you are interviewed you are not asked about being Persian or about Iran.

Sina Grace: I think a lot of people don't know what to say about it. It seems like they know – especially in Western American culture – that they are supposed to have a taste in their mouth about it, but they don't know much about it other than we make really good kabob! I actually think I have taken a more active role in presenting the Persian side of my identity, not because I feel a new connection to it, but because there is not much in terms of representation in Western culture. I felt as if it was my place to do something, and my place to talk about it. As someone who is half Persian, but was raised by the Persian side of my family, I feel one-hundred percent Persian, and yet sometimes I don't feel as if I have as much authority as someone else, but at the end of the day I have been to the country multiple times, I can speak Farsi, and I think Iranians deserve a fuller picture in terms of being seen and heard in American pop culture.

VZ: I agree. It seems that what people know from popular culture would be from Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* or perhaps Azar Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Tehran*.

SG: Even more to the point, these stories speak to such very specific experiences. They are rooted in such a specific moment in time, which is great, but for every one person creating *Maus* there are so many other narratives in that culture to be told.

I realised at one point that I was giving a lot of credit to the Kardashian family because at this time there are so many presentations of Middle Easterners with negative intent in pop culture, and at least here was one portrayal of a semi-Middle Eastern family where there was no dialogue about terrorism or about oppression. They were presenting themselves as fabulous on their own terms and they presented their bodies according to a Middle Eastern categorisation of beauty. It was really troubling for me that this was my only example of a different take on Middle

Eastern representation in popular culture.

Basically, I took a stance when Donald Trump was elected. My aunt was actually harassed at the airport by an employee for being Iranian. I said 'okay, enough is enough.' I felt a call to be political and my form of politics is sort of the Pedro Zamora, culture jamming. And you get a lot more flies with honey as the saying goes. My battle stance is you can't help but love me when I'm done with you.

VZ: That's great, and as we know 'love trumps hate.' So you have to love. You're right, though, about the Kardashians. They are one of our only examples. And I cannot think of any Persians in popular culture.

SG: There is *The Shah's of Sunset*, but need I say more? It's a version of being Persian. There is a lot of presentation of opulence when it comes to the Middle East, and I certainly saw that in my community but I was raised by a single mother and I was not part of that. I find that the things that make an Iranian a valuable person to have in your life doesn't have much to do with the visuals and the optics, and the gold. It is so much more. It goes back to love and it goes back to the food! That is a new role for me: to show a three dimensional version of a Persian!

VZ: Are you working on anything now? Will your next memoir be about being Persian?

SG: On my website I have this living PDF called *Persian Version*, where I will occasionally keep adding a few more pages to it. It is at about 40 something pages now. I add different things that are specific to being Persian and being Persian in America with adorable illustrations. Once again I wanted to contribute to the larger conversation and present something totally different, something that a lot of people don't focus on when dissecting Persian culture. For example, the concept of 'taarof.' That's in there. There is a comic of my grandmother and I 'taarofing'. And even more benign things, such as I feel like a lot of Persian parents use mnemonic devices when they name little children. These are all small adorable things I share with the intention of making Iranians more human. So I have that and I keep adding to it with the intention that one day I will have a 150-page book that I can release into the wild. (Figure 1)

What's weird is that I think in my next memoir I will be exploring the opposite of all things living: it's death. I do feel like I'm going to be examining culturally different notions of what death is. That's all I can say about what is coming up next for me. I have been very kind to myself and slow about making the project, but I certainly see that I keep circling back to that basic bit of death and dying, meditating around that.

VZ: Since we are talking about comics, I have to ask, why comics? And further to the point, how do you understand comics? I know it's a tired phrase when talking about comics, but your work is definitely experimental. For example, in *Self-Obsessed*, you have full pages of



Figure 1. *Persian Version*, by Sina Grace, 'Taarof.' Published by Sina Grace. Copyright (c) 2017. Reprinted by Permission of the artist All Rights Reserved.

text and yet it is still comics, you challenge the page, you are not strict in creating comics.

SG: I started at a very young age. I think the root emotion is that I find them cool. I think that it has always been a great employment of visual arts. As I got older, and I started to examine comics, when you start to think about it for the sake of making money you have to think 'why am I doing this?' And today, I think that it is that I love the marriage between static imagery and words to create a narrative. I studied writing in college, and writing straight prose never did it for me, and doing illustration never did it for me, but having them together in a larger story always appealed to me and always came as second nature in terms of growing within it. And I still love it. Now more than ever I love comics, especially after experimenting with film/television making the web series *Self-Obsessed*. (Figure 2)

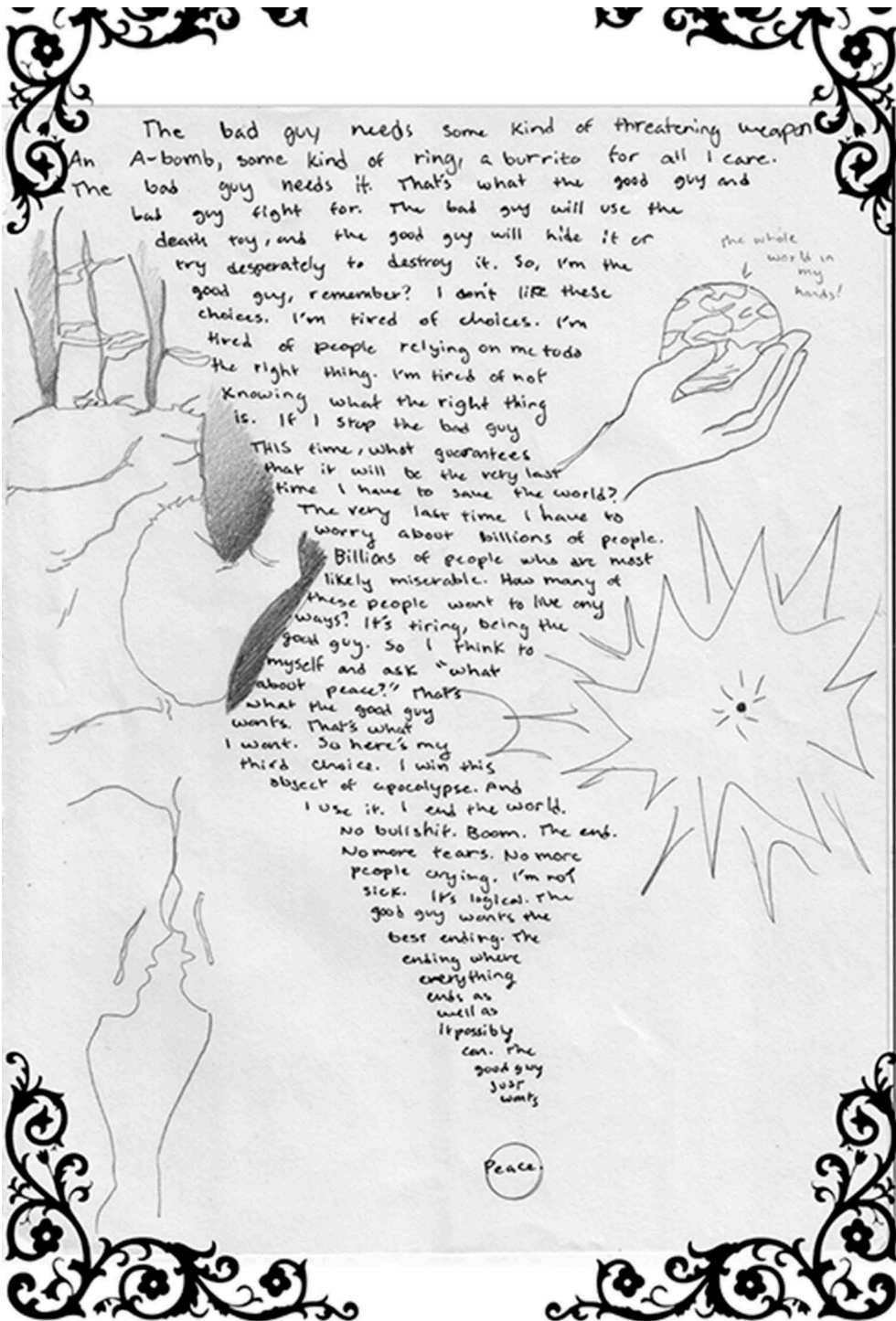


Figure 2. *Self-Obsessed*, by Sina Grace, n.p. Published by Image Comics. Copyright (c) 2015. Reprinted by Permission of the artist. All Rights Reserved.

The other thing I love about comics is the autonomy and the control you have on the work, and the control you have over the reader. The pacing and the panel layouts manage where the eye goes. It fascinates me how you can have that much control over the other participant without sound, and without emotion. It's fun to keep trying, playing with it and keep working at it. To try things traditionally, and then to try things that come from who knows where and not question it, but to see what the reception is. So it still stimulates me. That's why comics. It started out as looking cool, and then became the only form of storytelling – thinking of author intention – where I feel what I intend reaches the reader closer than anything else.

VZ: I love this discussion of author intent you are suggesting. I am not a strict postmodernist, so I would love to hear more about this.

SG: I am all over the place with traditional postmodernism. I think you only have so much control at the end of the day, and you only have so much control as to how your mind is filtering these thoughts onto the page. I do my best, I try to cover my tracks and try to think I have control over the work, but then I will see a comment or a review, and I will say 'you got that from this experience? Okay!' I try speaking to both schools of thought because I think that at the end of the day post-postmodernism accepts both theories. It ends with nobody's perfect, and that is where I am at in my work.

VZ: It's why I love comics, they're not perfect, there is an 'uncleanness' to the form. It is like when you say in the introduction to *Nothing Lasts Forever*, 'this book is intentionally a bit rough. Sorry not sorry.' As a social worker, I could hand your book or many comics to someone that I work with and they can say, 'I could do something like this.'

SG: And that is where my marriage of the two schools of thought come into play: I will intend as much as I want, but I am fully aware (after my examination of the collective unconscious), I send something out, and there is no way of knowing how it will all be received.

And of course the tides are changing. I wrote a story in *All New X-men Annual* #1 when Black Lives Matter was emerging and I thought by the time that this story was released it would not have as strong a meaning, and then cut to seven months later and now it has this massive relevance because of what is happening with Trump and the attitude towards black people in America. I thought this was old and dated, and now it is super fresh and necessary. I take both with a grain of salt and I take both with a huge amount of respect and sincerity. I just always try to cover my tracks.

That is why I take different approaches and theories on literary criticism because sometimes these things come from very personal, instinctual places. That happened with me on a lot of projects. You cannot control what inspires you to sit and write, besides wanting to

make it. I have tried so many times to write novels. I say okay this time it's a short story collection, this time it is a novella. It doesn't come out of me, doesn't feel good or gets bad reception. This is the advice I've been fighting my whole life probably because I come from a place where I studied literary theory, and I hit myself over the head with it too much, but sometimes you just have to follow the id, come from a place of joy, and then use your brain muscles after the fact to make sure the meaning lies where you want it to be before the reader gets access to the work. That is sort of why I dove into memoir. If I had my druthers I would probably be like Jeff Lemire where I would tell pulp fiction stories with a tinge of memoir to them. At the end of the day what comes out of me easily, what comes out of me strongly is telling very direct memoir stories.

I also think the other reason I love comics is that when you come upon authors who do both the writing and drawing, there is no glimpse into the soul that is purer than that. Because I think the mistakes, the foibles, the errors give you the person. It gives the book individuality and a singular nature. In *Nothing Lasts Forever* I grabbed hold of that. I intentionally left some goof ups to remind the reader that this is a real story, it happened to a real person, these are real people, these are real things. Someone in production pointed out to me that they could see eraser marks on the page from when I had put in my love interest's real name in the book, to when I decided to change it to 'Cash' for the final production. The person in production said he could see the eraser marks, and I said 'yeah, I am gonna keep that.' It's a good reminder that this is a person whose identity I have to protect because these are things that happened. I think as much I wish I could stick to form, I love breaking form. And anyway I have *Iceman* for form. He is there for that part of my brain, and memoir is there for when I want to try something new. (Figure 3)

VZ: As a cartoonist, then, writing in these different genres and as a person with intersecting identities, who do you turn to? For example, who are your references as a queer cartoonist or as a Persian cartoonist?

SG: I go all over the place. I bring up Marjane Satrapi a lot because *Persepolis* was super special to me at a very special time in my life. More than anything I love her book, *Embroideries*. I love that she has such a strong, confident line, she is able to tell these wonderful character stories, she employs such an economy of line. Similarly, my friend MariNaomi, her memoirs speak to me because she clearly has technique but it is not as hyper stylised as Daniel Clowes or as detailed as Chris Ware, but it's still her voice. She manages to accomplish so much with so little. She makes things honest, interesting, raw, without exploiting or sensationalising these moments in her life. It comes from how she tells her story as a writer, and then how she illustrates as an artist. I always come



Figure 3. *Nothing Lasts Forever*, by Sina Grace, n.p. Published by Image Comics. Copyright (c) 2017. Reprinted by Permission of the artist. All Rights Reserved.

back to Craig Thompson's *Blankets* because that was a very powerful book for me when I was younger. I love Jeff Lemire as well.

I like to find character studies that can bring levity to potentially heavy subject matter. In terms of queer voices, if ever I need to challenge myself I always look at Rick Worley's books because they are so funny and so crass, and he doesn't care. And I have to remind myself to not care because at the end of the day if you are not doing this for yourself you are not doing this for the right reason. Those are my 'go tos' in terms of voices that make me want to tell stories. I go all over the place. I try to take from every culture, see how they approach things and then do it my own way.

VZ: Speaking of Jeff Lemire. I love the intro he wrote for *Self-Obsessed*.

SG: What a vote of confidence, right? Speaking of author intention, I feel like his intro validated the next 130 pages for the reader.

And back to that word: love. Jeff Lemire loves this medium. He loves comic books. No one would be telling these kinds of stories if they didn't love it. So I always try to follow those voices. They seem to have happier trajectories in their lives.

VZ: Satrapi's *Embroideries* is definitely one of my favourite stories ever. Do you turn to other Persian cartoonists? Do you turn to any of the more classic Persian writers?

SG: In all honesty, no. But I do still have this beginner's Farsi book (unfortunately I cannot cite any particular author in it) about reading and writing. My sister and I – she is an artist too, strictly visual arts – we both go back to these rudimentary illustrations in these Persian books. It goes back to the way Satrapi draws things: the heavy line work. I also gravitate towards older children's books in Farsi. I have a handful of those that I like to look at and I draw on them. I haven't sought out any multiple Persian voices, but mostly because I have been sort of bored by contemporary Persian authors. I don't see some of the rehashing of the same themes and tropes interesting after a point.

VZ: So we have talked quite a bit about being Persian and about comics, we should talk about *Iceman*. Before we continue, though, I have to admit that I was never terribly interested in Bobby Drake. What I am interested in – what I love! – about your take on the character is that you stress the intersectionality of his queerness and the mutant metaphor.

SG: It is interesting that you bring up the notion of intersectionality with him because my focus is that Bobby could kind of have avoided his current situation. I feel that with the character I am thinking about passability, how he can always continue to pass as a straight man or as a non-mutant because he can tuck his powers away at his will or at his leisure. That is where I am playing with the tension of intersectionality. Bobby can constantly avoid the pressure or not deal with it as others do. There is a different kind

of meaning applied though when he does make the decision to stand up and make that choice to make his identity known.

I think that does come from a little bit of a personal place for me. Not everyone can immediately tell I am Iranian (or Persian). So not everyone can throw racial slurs at me immediately about me being Middle Eastern. I have gotten everything, Jewish-looking, Greek, Latino. Ultimately I get kind of placed as a safe, ethnic white. No one immediately feels threatened by me even though culturally there is a massive, nationwide negative feeling about Middle Eastern people. I also feel like if I don't talk, then I can also pass as straight, if I'm not like wearing a tankini.

For all intents and purposes Bobby passes for a cisgender white male, when you apply the mutant metaphor and the sexuality, he has his own struggles. It's a story that you do not see as often in popular culture: the guy who comes out in his 30s. And that is a narrative that exists. I try to speak to that because it had not been done. I don't know what I can bring to the table besides speaking to these conflicts and tensions that exist in my own mind.

VZ: Being Persian and queer myself, I do think it is important that we share these stories.

SG: I love that tension. It is an active choice to not pass and to not sort of silence himself. I have been playing into that and leaning into it in the series. It is an active choice for Bobby and he is actively subjecting himself to whatever comes from it. At the end of the day my stance is that it leads to a more enriching life when you do accept all of these parts of yourself. It also leads to some pain, and some good storytelling.

To me that is part of the next step in terms of embracing diversity and equality. In order for things to grow, there needs to be an aggressive agenda, but there also needs to be love. I'm like Ellen DeGeneres: I'm going to massage you into the present.

VZ: So could you share the story of how you got to write the *Iceman* book?

SG: I had been working here and there with an editor in the X-men offices, and I was vocal about wanting to do more there. I was volunteering pitches. I was trying everything to prove that I wanted in. When the editors were getting ready to gear up for the 'RessurXion' re-launch – the 2017 re-launch of the X-men books at Marvel – they wanted to give Iceman his own series because Brian Michael Bendis had the character come out during his run, which spoke to the subtext brewing around the character for some time. Then the X-men books didn't deal with it because the X-men got pulled into a summer storyline. Now was the perfect time. Then an editor in the office asked me what would I do with Iceman?

When it came time to meditate on it and think about the character, similar to you and your gut reaction, I just did not have much of a relationship with Bobby beyond that he is the funny guy that throws

ice at people. I looked at that and I looked at myself, I thought about times in my life when I did not want the spotlight on me. And I said ‘oh, he’s compartmentalising.’ That was my pitch: he has been hidden from you. You’ve never met him. He is hiding all this pain behind humour. If you ever read any comedian’s memoir when they have reached the finish line, they share how they used pain, turning it into jokes, using jokes to hide in plain sight. I leaned into that and it got me the job because as I understand it, this was a character study that had not been brought to the table before. From there I sort of began to understand the character more than I ever had before.

I always try to find real life examples of what this character is doing, not only to speak to the reader, but also so that there is a foundation of truth behind the actions and motivations outside of all my weird charts and exercises I perform so that there is a narrative cohesion.

VZ: What do you do to decide where you will go next with *Iceman*?

SG: I think about what Bobby’s role is going to be in a story arc. With the first storyline it was easy because it was about coming out, coming out on your terms, and trying to be comfortable with yourself after coming out. You start from there, and then you ask yourself what conflicts come from that. And because it’s a comic book, the conflict is physical and the conflict isn’t mystified. So you think, ‘what bad guy is the perfect metaphor for what *Iceman* has to overcome in his life?’ My editor at the time referred to it as the *Grey’s Anatomy* model. Whichever patient came into the hospital room, their ailment would speak directly to what the doctor’s inner conflict was. That’s where I start with things. Where does Bobby need to land at the end of it? And how does he get there?

VZ: Okay, so for example, the introduction of Juggernaut in *Iceman* #5 to end the coming out storyline.

SG: Yes, that was a very easy metaphor from a storytelling standpoint. I thought it was going to go a different way though. I was going to have Bobby fight Juggernaut, lose the fight, and then be so beaten down and exhausted that he came to his parents and then came out to them. I got a pretty interesting editorial note, though, to have the Juggernaut story come after Bobby fights Daken in issue 4. Daken, who represents complete comfort in his skin, he is an unapologetic bisexual male. After being presented with that personality, he comes out to his parents, and then Juggernaut represents the brutality of that conversation. It gives readers a very physical, visceral example of what that conversation is like with your parents. (Figure 4)

VZ: Alright, and lastly, how about a fun question? You are writing *Iceman* now. What other characters would you like to write or draw for that matter?



Figure 4. Iceman #5, Cover. Writer: Sina Grace, Penciller: Alessandro Vitti, Cover Artist: Marco D'Alfonso. Copyright (c) 2017. Reprinted by Permission of Marvel Comics. All Rights Reserved.

SG: If I could write a character, well, I love the X-men, I would love to get a bunch of teenagers and do a teen X-men book.
 If I could draw a character, I do not want to write her, but I would love to draw Death, the Neil Gaiman character – back to death!
 Ha! I would totally be someone's work for hire if I got the opportunity to draw Death.