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Navigating the Academy

Review of *The Curie Society* by Anna McFarlane

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# NAVIGATING THE ACADEMY

Review by Anna McFarlane

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**Harvey, Janet, writer. *The Curie Society*. Illustrated by Sonia Liao, MIT Press, 2021. Graphic Novel.**

There has been a significant tradition in Anglophone culture of harnessing the power of the graphic novel for didactic purposes. As Juliane Blank points out in "Adaptation" (2021), the tradition of Albert Kanter's *Classic Comics* series, which adapted classics of the English and American canon into comic book form, continues to this day (194). The theory goes that the bold artistry can be used to capture the eye of even the most distracted target audiences, and the visual medium means that the pressure is taken off of the words to carry the story. Such an approach can create graphic novels that lack the gravity of texts produced by artists whose aim is merely to inhabit the form, rather than exploit it. For example, there are now graphic-novelisations of many classic literary works, designed for accessibility but often lacking the harmony (or tension) between text and image that great comics know how to use (although there are notable exceptions, such as Russ Kick's *The Graphic Canon: The World's Great Literature as Comics and Visuals* series, 2012-2013). From its front cover, *The Curie Society* is clearly a graphic novel pitched at encouraging young women into STEM subjects (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics). Its heroines appear to float in zero G (although this is not what is happening, given that one of them rides a jet board and there are drones using propellers in the mix as well). Our heroines are dressed in matching jumpsuits, not so far from the slick uniforms of *Star Trek: Discovery* (2017 – present), and they are watched over by a traditional portrait of Marie Curie in the background. This contrast between the historical figure of Curie and the speed of scientific progress gives the impression of a work that seeks to marry the two, showing a rich tradition of women in STEM while promising that such women will shape our future.

While this first impression might suggest a didactic and worthy text with little to offer an adult reader, the story itself is interesting and the artwork complementary. Our heroes Simone, Maya, and Taj meet in their freshman year at university when they find themselves sharing a dorm room. At first there is conflict between them: Simone, a life sciences major, leaves her ant colonies lying around; Maya, the mathematician, is a spoilt little rich girl who is none too pleased when Taj gets hair dye on her monogrammed towels; and Taj, who has an affinity for electronics, is not impressed with roommates who take little interest in gaming. The three are brought together when they receive an invitation to join the Curie Society, a secret organisation started by Marie Curie and based in universities all around the world, which develops the talents of young women in the STEM subjects, preparing them for a lifetime of using their skills for the greater good. The new recruits see de-extinction (bringing extinct species back to life through genetics à la *Jurassic Park*, 1993) being trialled to slow the pace of climate change and ionic winds used to sustainably power aircraft.

These technologies are represented as science-fictional but tantalisingly close to realisation, simply requiring the commitment of these young characters to the goals of scientific progress. However, this vision, represented as utopian, is soon complicated as the young women face the villains of the piece. There is Amy Vauss, an ex-Curie Society member now working for the private sector. There is also Dr Xio who, while she holds the same goals as the Curie Society, believes that the ends justify the means and is prepared to kill human beings in pursuit of her belief that decisions for humanity's future should be made via science alone. The message is that an individualistic pursuit of money amounts to the exploitation of the noble traditions of science, while a purely scientist perspective comes at a human cost. The Curie Society teaches that interdisciplinarity, teamwork, and respect for other people is fundamental to the successful pursuit of science. One could argue that this is a particularly idealistic approach that ignores the ways in which 'science' is inextricable from discourses of capitalism, colonial exploitation, and utilitarianism, but the point of the book is to paint scientific study in a good light, so perhaps it is churlish to point this out.

The setting of the book in a university means that a number of issues can be overlooked; primarily, the wealth and privilege necessary for a student to make it into further education in the USA. The university is idealised as a place of knowledge and tradition, the kind of environment that allows Marie Curie's legacy to be passed down the generations; this stability and intellectualism might be hard to recognise for those in the academy dealing with neoliberal policies and the ensuing precarity. There is a nod to realpolitik when it becomes clear that the Curie Society is funded by the scientific patents of its scholars, allowing the society to keep its independence. While this suggests the necessity for academics to hustle for funding in order to pursue their interests, this entrepreneurial structure is idealised in the book rather than acting as an obstacle to the pursuit of knowledge.

While the university is idealised in some ways, the environment is shown to be patriarchal, and sometimes unsafe for women. On Simone's first day on campus, she is bowled over by a male student as he catches a frisbee; a young student, she is dwarfed by him, which sets the scene for an environment that might not allow her to flourish. Later, Taj witnesses some frat boys hassling a young woman at a music event and violently intervenes. The need for violence as a response to a violent world comes up regularly in the book: Taj is a good, physical fighter against these misogynists, while Maya is given a ring similar to a Taser to protect her during a mission, and even punches someone, crowing 'I've never punched anyone before!' (137). The implication that violence is a necessary part of training to be effective in the world is perhaps a little at odds with the book's core messages of teamwork and empathy, and perhaps a legacy of the comic book medium which finds it hard to resist the visual catharsis of a fist fight.

As problematic as some of these points might be, the fact that this graphic novel raises such questions is an accolade in itself. On the score of offering a didactic and encouraging introduction to women considering a STEM career, it has many features to recommend it. The novel is peppered with quotes from Marie Curie herself, suggestively bringing her voice into the story in a way that might encourage young readers to find out more about her. The novel does not stop with name-dropping

Curie but includes a range of female scientists and features a series of biographies at the end, informing the reader about the real-life scientists who consulted on the book, as well as a glossary of terms giving information about the scientific theories featured and advice about where to learn more. As an introduction to STEM study for young women this book is persuasive and engaging; for others, its assumptions encourage the reader to ask questions about the systems (particularly of patriarchy and neoliberalism) that the academy demands its scholars and staff navigate. The gap between this uncomplicatedly utopian presentation of science and the reality that faces women entering these disciplines is informative, and tells us why a book like this has a market in the first place. If the real world were more like that portrayed in *The Curie Society*, I doubt that we would need persuasive graphic novels to encourage young women into the STEM disciplines.

#### WORKS CITED

Blank, Juliane. "Adaptation." *The Handbook of Comics and Graphic Narratives*, edited by Dan Hassler-Forest and Dirk Vanderbeke, De Gruyter, 2021, 183-212.

#### BIONOTE

**Anna McFarlane** is a British Academy Postdoctoral Fellow at the University of Glasgow, UK, working on traumatic pregnancy and its expression in science fiction, horror, and fantasy. She is the co-editor of *The Routledge Companion to Cyberpunk Culture* (2020) and is co-editing *The Edinburgh Companion to Science Fiction and the Medical Humanities*. Her first monograph is a study of William Gibson's novels, *Cyberpunk Culture and Psychology: Seeing Through the Mirrorshades* (Routledge 2021).