



Review: *Epileptic* by David B.

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***Epileptic* by David B.**
368pp / Jonathan Cape (2005) / £16.99
Review by Emma Tinker

Comics often highlight awkward gaps in one's critical vocabulary. To use the label 'magic realism' to describe anything but prose fiction feels like cheating, and yet the monsters which populate David B's *Epileptic* are more than metaphor, more than fantasy. For all the expressionist drawings of ghosts, bird-men, giant snakes, demonic faces, and talking cats, *Epileptic* is indisputably a work of autobiography, and the world it depicts is the narrator's reality. As David puts it, 'Only fantasy books can make sense of the skewed reality in which I live'.

Originally published in French, *Epileptic* has been available in translation since 2002, but as is often the case with comics, it has remained almost invisible to critics until the emergence of a single-volume edition by a major UK publisher. It tells the story of David B., born Pierre-Francois Beauchard, and his family's struggle with his older brother's epilepsy. Their frustrating quest for a cure leads them past conventional doctors and psychiatrists into an endlessly expanding world of alternative medicine. They visit any number of gurus, an acupuncturist, several macrobiotic specialists, a spiritualist, a Rosicrucian, a Spagyric alchemist, and a Swedenborgian minister because, as David explains, '[p]aths that might potentially lead to a cure for Jean-Christophe's epilepsy keep opening up, and so long as my mother hasn't tried every single one she'll be tormented by guilt'.

The systems of belief that promise a cure grow ever more bizarre, and David's sense of an objective reality becomes increasingly unsteady. Epilepsy is represented as a dragon-like demon, which controls, manipulates, and overwhelms Jean-Christophe's helpless body. David B's woodcut-style drawings of demons, warriors, and ghosts entangle with illustrations of the esoteric philosophies in which his parents are desperate to believe, with the result that no monstrous delusion seems any less plausible than the others.

Behind the magic there lies an urgent need to control violence. From early childhood, David (then Pierre-Francois) draws chaotic battle scenes, and his first book, produced in collaboration with his brother, shows their sister being tortured on every page. Where David channels his frustration and anger through art, Jean-Christophe grows increasingly paranoid and aggressive as his illness progresses into adolescence and adulthood.

As the memoir of a childhood dominated by another's debilitating illness, *Epileptic* is desperately sad, with no promise of a cosy resolution. As a work of graphic non-fiction (and, like Spiegelman's *Maus*, it remains non-fiction in spite of its imaginative form), it represents an unusually sophisticated engagement with the comics medium. It is a stunning book and a very welcome addition to that elite collection of texts

which one can confidently lend to a sceptic with the assurance that *this* is what comics can do.