

MANGA VERSE

ZINE OF TOMORROW

6.1

JUL 22



- MIZUKI Shigeru Exhibition!
- Comics Reviews!
- Episode Guide to classic anime
Humanoid Monster BEM!!
- ...and lots of peachy keen ART!

**SPECIAL
YOKAI
ISSUE**

PATOKON

MANGA
ANIME

J-FILM
J-CULTURE

MANGAVERSE 6.1 The YOKAI Issue! // 7-2022

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Contents art by Yushi

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Tengu by Yushi

INTROID

Yoinks and away!

Welcome to our special yokai-themed issue. It took me a lot longer than I planned to get this one out but here we finally are. Without getting too deep into it, my work schedule was insane because besides teaching online to businesspersons and interpreting for international events/projects, I'm teaching at 5 universities including one where I'm in my second year of teaching manga history, and my research activities were nuts as well with two research papers, one published in Japanese and one soon to be published in English in the International Journal of Comic Art, plus two presentations on mermaids in Japanese comics.

In addition to all that, then I traveled to the US to help take care of my mother. She beat the cancer in her lungs, but other complications happened and in May she passed away after reaching her 50th wedding anniversary and her 73rd birthday. As Leon Kowalski says in *Blade Runner*, "My mother? Let me tell you about my mother..." In relation to comics, animation, films, etc., even when I was quite young, my mother never limited me as to what media I was allowed to consume. She never batted an eye when I checked out the books on witchcraft, she enjoyed watching horror flicks with me as a little kid (and helped me explain what was going on to dear ol' dad), lent me her Stephen King books (I got them before dad because I was a quicker reader), and used to read my *Savage Sword of Conan* after I finished mine. If not for her and my dad trusting me to find my own limits as to what I was into, I'll always be appreciative. Thanks, mom.

About this ish, we've got a Comics Art exhibition report by **Ian McMurray** on the man who helped make yokai a household word, **MIZUKI Shigeru**, Manga Reviews by **Jim Reddy**, US Comics reviews by **Heath Row**, a detailed history of the word balloon by **Tristan Vick**, and our special feature, a detailed episode guide to the 1968 groundbreaking anime series ***Yokai Ningen Bem*** (Humanoid Monster BEM). We've also got some great art by Verse regulars **Yushi Tabara**, **Tomoko Hirabayashi**, **Jim Reddy**, **Kenji Inoue** and more! I hope you enjoy it. Cheers!

—Patrick Ijima-Washburn

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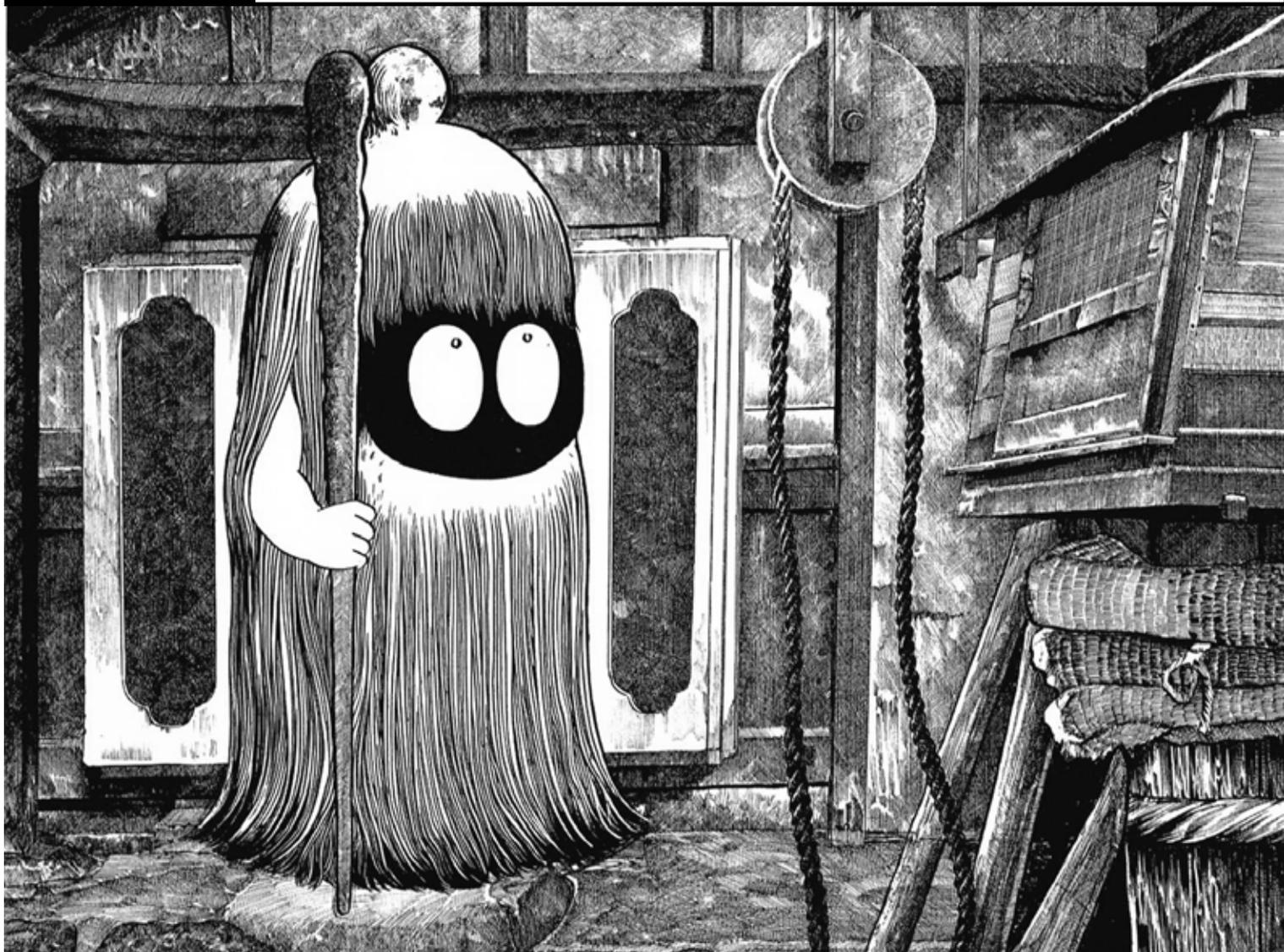


Night Stalker by Yushi



Yokai Parade by Kenji Inoue

SPIRIT MANGA Exhibition



Yokai, Local Japanese Monsters

Manga has some towering figures, TEZUKA Osamu being one whose name is common knowledge in Japan. MIZUKI Shigeru is certainly in the discussion, though I'm not nearly knowledgeable enough about manga to rank him on a Tezuka-scale. He created a breakout character with *Kitaro* in the '60s [Ed: late '50s] that is still pretty much a household name, if less so for the younger generation. I first noticed him when he died in 2015, and it was front page in the Japanese newspapers.

Drawn and Quarterly have been publishing his work in English over the past decade, but like a lot of pre-2000 manga, its release in English has been spotty. Compared to manga currently in production or linked to current TV series, "classic" manga has less of an audience in the West.

Myself, I'm only a casual reader of his work, specifically I've read *Showa*, his history of the Showa Era, and *Tono Monogatari* (Tono Stories), a book released this year about yokai stories of the Tono region.

It's impossible to talk about Mizuki without introducing you to the concept of *yokai*: traditional Japanese supernatural spirits and creatures. Mizuki had a diverse career, but a lot of the work centered around yokai. In many ways, the success of his yokai-themed series helped keep the idea of this folklore alive in Japan, as the country underwent rapid change.

For the past few years, an exhibit of his work intertwined with a history of his life has been shown in museums in Japan, and it is currently appearing at a museum a 15-minute walk from my in-laws' house. I had to check it out, despite only a limited knowledge of his 50-year catalogue. A creator that has the success he had is worth taking a look at.

I've never read any of *Kitaro*. I've heard it's a classic, and my bookshelf of hardcover Carl Barks Duck comics is proof I'm not opposed to comics aimed at kids, but I just have never made the effort. Approaching the exhibition, I had some worry that it was going to be mostly a feature of *Kitaro* stuff,



A self-portrait of Mizuki surrounded by his creations, brought to life.

but the fear was unfounded. In the way that an exhibit of Dr. Seuss would probably put *The Cat in the Hat* front and center, the exhibition is a business, and they put what is his brand up front.

Walking in, the exhibit starts with blown-up images of landscapes of the rural town he was raised in. While Mizuki wrote a lot of fiction, he also wrote a number of stories that are either autobiographical or that inserted himself in the story, giving the exhibit lots of opportunities to let him show his life with his own pen.



A landscape by 14-year-old Mizuki in 1936.

The exhibit is broken up into eight sections. The first is a number of his works from his youth. There are newspaper headlines from the 1930s proclaiming him as a creative prodigy. Some of it was certainly just a small town newspaper lacking news, but he definitely had an ambitious eye by the age of 16. There are landscapes in watercolor or pencil, and all manner of illustration.

Japan had had a European influence since the Meiji era, but nowhere near what it would post-war. One of the more incredible pieces from his youth is an illustrated scroll telling



Beyond here, no photography allowed unfortunately. Most images here are from the exhibition program or related materials.

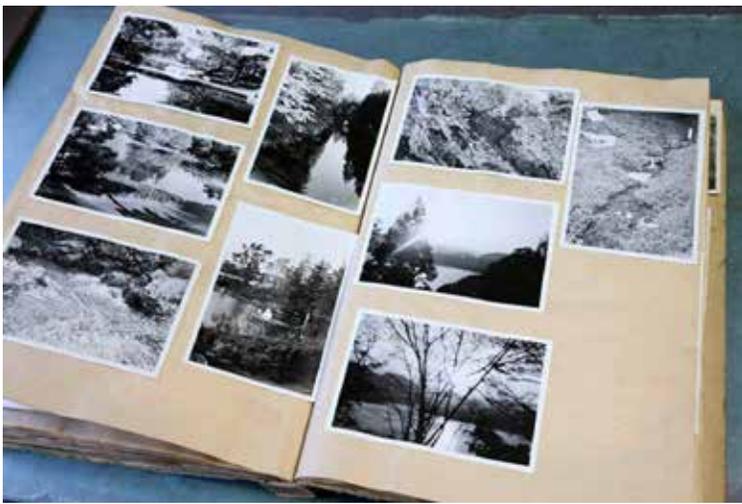
the story of a colony of ants. It's not quite like anything I've seen before. Conceptually it's like Edo era scroll art, but has some debt to 20th century European commercial illustration as well.

The second section is about his studio and how he made his work, and while his youth work was interesting, some of the work in the second area blew me away. For years I've seen these in-depth backgrounds in manga work, and never given too much thought to the process behind it, especially with the knowledge that mainstream manga is made in a factory style way, with any number of assistants doing the tedious work.

Here, we can see examples of the dozens if not hundreds of



Actually pieces of one long scroll that tells a story from right to left. The white characters in the lower left read, "end".



One album from of a wall of photo albums he kept as image files for his art.

photo scrapbooks that Mizuki kept to render scenery, and also examples of how he used them in his work. There are image upon image of cards with lovingly drawn scenery, each with blank spaces where he could insert characters.

The section also shows the nibs and brushes, and the jars he kept his paints in. It's an amazing look into the process of a man who lived to make art.

The third section is about *Kitaro* (numerous Kitaro books have been published by Drawn & Quarterly since the 2010s), and had dozens of comic pages lined up around the room. You



There's a ridiculous amount of these that he amassed over the years.

can see where he pasted things together, where he left space for narration, and his technique in general. He tends to have one or two highly detailed scenes, then a number of more animated figure panels. The heavily detailed panels ground the story, while the ones focused on figures help propel it along.

Unfortunately, I personally have never read *Kitaro*, so it doesn't have resonance for me as a series, but it's still pretty gorgeous to look at, and a chance to see the production process of Showa era manga.



An Akuma-kun page from around 1970.



Mizuki watched his entire unit die, and it's amazing that his work for the rest of his life isn't haunted by trauma. c. 1970.



As incredible as this looks, it's far more incredible in person. c. 1986.

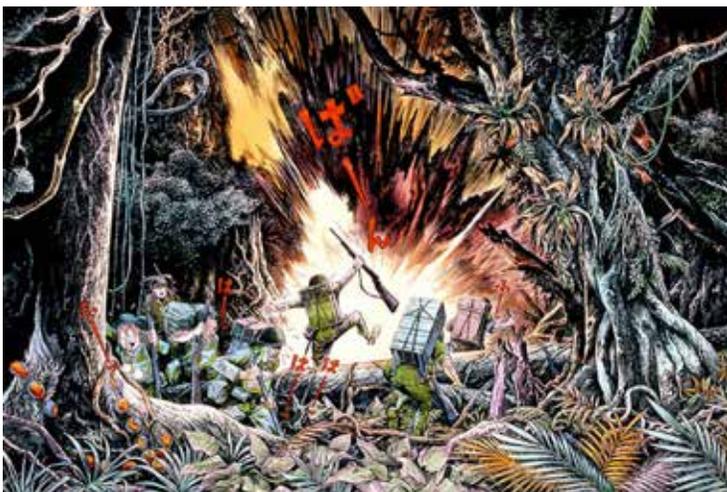
They also throw in a number of illustrations he did for covers and magazines, which use different coloring processes, but generally use ink as a base. One illustration for a Japanese TV magazine featuring the character *Akuma-kun* uses a dizzying variety of textures to render the scales, fur, shadows and flame, water and air.

The fourth section of the exhibit is a selection of work from *Onward Toward Our Noble Deaths* (Drawn & Quarterly, 2011), an autobio manga he did in the '70s about his time as a

soldier in Papua New Guinea in World War II.

The manga is dense and the pictures on display often violent. In the war, Mizuki lost his left arm and was the only survivor of his unit. The pages show explosions and maiming, with Mizuki using splotches of ink and correction fluid to capture the chaos.

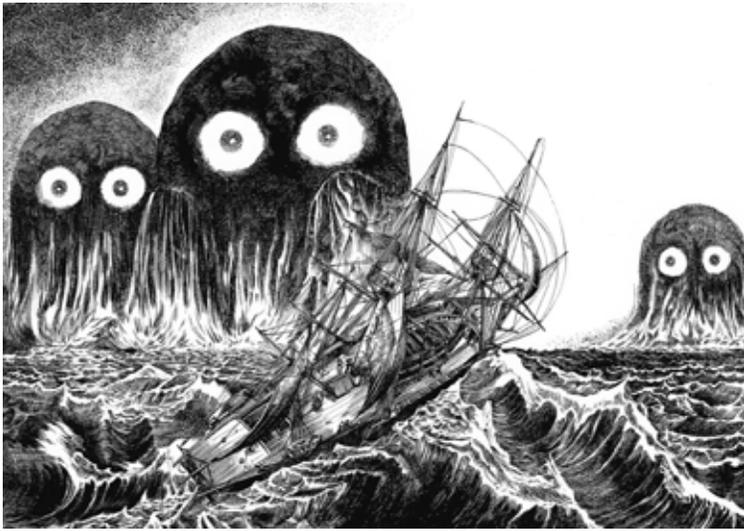
At the same time, he draws these pages with a lot of love, and one picture in particular (which I couldn't take a photo of) shows the silhouette of a hundred men marching



Walking toward death, c. 1986



c. 1960



That's some big yokai.



What a cute little kappa.

on the beach under a canopy of palm trees, with islands and further islands off in the distance, their silhouettes rendered in degrees of hatching to create atmospheric perspective. It's both harrowing and beautiful to look at. This part of the exhibit includes a number of paintings and sketches he did about the Pacific War.

The fifth section covers biography works he did. In English, one of his earliest translated works was a book on the life of Hitler, but he also did biographies of the Swedish philosopher Emmanuel Swedenborg, Japanese philosopher Inoue Enryo, and Heien figure Abe no Seimei, among others. Beyond being passionate about creating images and stories, this section of the exhibit shows his curiosity into the thought and direction of history.

The sixth section covers numerous short stories Mizuki worked on. Much like the sections for *Kitaro* and *Onwards*, these sections are a great opportunity to see how his pages were constructed, and how tightly he was able to ink a page.

The seventh section was the most gob-smackingly beautiful section for me though, a section of his yokai illustrations. It was accompanied by bronzes and sculptures of many of his characters and designs, but I'm not as appreciative of that kind of work myself. The illustrations here though were the work of a mature artist applying every skill he'd learned.

The wall was lined with image after heavily rendered image, populated by yokai of Mizuki's design. Yokai are traditional folklore, and to the best of my knowledge, he was just interpreting stories he heard as a child or that he heard about in his years after becoming renowned for drawing them. A lot of these were his own way of interpreting them, not some image ingrained in the cultural consciousness.

It's probably easiest to see with his *kappa* images. Kappas are very well-known yokai, a beaked turtle figure, and Mizuki's kappas are his own.

The eighth and final section of the exhibit is titled: "An expert on life". It shows work from his late years. Some of the work here uses characters and themes from his career, but filtered through more traditional Japanese calligraphy and brush work. Having seen this overview of his career, so many ideas raced through my head in the course of the afternoon.

The first was some sadness at the current digital age. The work Mizuki was doing at as a teen still carries quite an impact today. In theory, digital tools should let us do more, but I think for most people, they let us do less. Mizuki developed skills that made him like a magician, and I think the lack of tools was a big part of that.

Looking at the sheer amount of pages over five decades, I thought of him in comparison to a creator like Jack Kirby. They both produced a staggering amount of work, and it reflects a passion for



Some more calligraphic work, c. 2009.



creation. As much as art was a job for Mizuki Shigeru, it's clear that art was a joy to him as well.

By the end, I had seen so many incredible images in the course of a few hours, it was hard to take it all in. It was like trying to enjoy all of the food at a five-star hotel buffet. A person just isn't meant to take in so much at once.

I would really like to see it again a few more times, but that window is closing. Instead, I've ordered a Kitaro collection to see what that book is all about.

If you want to read some good Mizuki, I heartily recommend *Tono Monogatari* (Drawn & Quarterly, 2021) [Ed: See a review later in this ish], a collection of over 100 folktales from the Tono region of Japan. It's beautiful and weird, and likely different from anything you've ever read. Japanese folktales are a lot more "neutral" than European ones, which often had a moral or at least a conflict resolution. Japanese folktales are more like a weird story someone told you in the schoolyard that got enshrined into legend. For example, in one story from *Tono Monogatari*, a fisherman is coming home late at night and sees his wife out on the road. He knows his wife would never be out late, so he kills her, assuming it was a fox. The body remains his wife's, so he runs home in fear, only to wake up his wife, sleeping in bed. Perplexed, he runs back and sees the body has now turned into a fox. The end. The point of the story is that sometimes foxes can inhabit people's dreams.

Great little book!

— Ian McMurray

Ian McMurray is a Canadian, now settled and working as an educator in Sapporo, Japan. Starting with *Uncanny X-Men* #200 in 1985, an unreasonable percentage of his income has gone toward purchasing the sequential arts. He is a lifelong comics proselytizer, yet is genre agnostic, and makes comics under the name Ian M.

(This article initially published here: <https://www.popcultureandcomics.com/post/comics-art-shigeru-mizuki-s-spirit-manga-exhibition>)

This is an occasional column of comic book reviews—previously titled “See You in the Funny Papers”—focusing on titles related to science fiction, fantasy, and horror. The comics and graphic novels covered will be of potential interest to Neffers but generally not be manga. You should be able to find the recommended series and titles at your local comic shop.

(You can find a local store using <https://www.comicshoplocator.com>.)

The Cimmerian: Beyond the Black River #1-2 (Ablaze, 2020)

Continuing Ablaze Publishing’s reprints of European Conan adaptations, this miniseries is a graphic interpretation of Robert E. Howard’s story “Beyond the Black River,” originally published in *Weird Tales* in May and June 1935. Written by Mathieu Gabella and drawn by Anthony Jean, this was first published by Editions Glénat in 2018. The story—which is also reprinted in 16 text pages in the issues—takes our hero to the province of Conajohara, the Black River, and the borders of Pictic country. Conan encounters a new settler named Balthus after slaying a Pict. On their way back to the fort, the two find a man named Tiberias decapitated by a forest demon sent by the sorcerer Zogar Sag. Threatened by settlers’ encroachment on Pictish lands, Sag has been luring residents of the fort to their dooms. A party led by Conan to investigate whether the clans of Picts are gathering under one leader is captured, and Conan encounters a giant serpent and a vicious simian. Balthus and Conan are able to escape, warding off the beasts of the forest by drawing a symbol sacred to Jhebbal Sag in the soil. The fort destroyed, the pair turn their attention to evacuating nearby villagers and farmers before meeting the Pict demon who’s been enchanting the settlers and removing their heads. For the moment, the threat of a unified Pictish incursion is thwarted. With each cover emblazoned with a banner strip reading “Robert E. Howard’s savage hero uncensored!” the various miniseries are unabashed and graphic in their rendering of Howard’s writing. Gabella’s adaptation is able, balancing exposition and character development with action—and you can draw your own conclusions by reading the original fiction, as well. And Jean’s artwork, while not overly grisly, captures Conan’s manner and mannerisms well.



Highlights include the depictions of the Picts, the sequence with the giant serpent, Conan’s conversations with Balthus, and the aspect of magic when the demon is slain. But Ablaze and Glénat’s return to the original source material is what makes these series work as well as they do. Being able to read the original fiction side by side as it’s adapted is a real treat, and the resulting titles far surpass the ongoing series currently published by Marvel—though it, too, is also enjoyable.

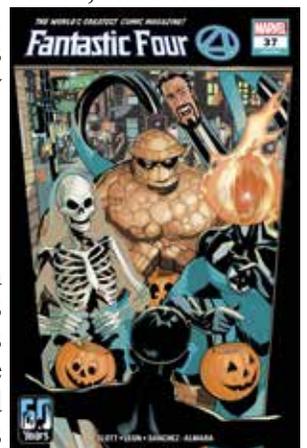
Critical Role: The Tales of Exandria: The Bright Queen #1 (Dark Horse, October 2021)

This media tie-in comic book isn’t just a *Dungeons & Dragons* licensed title—though there are those—it’s a Critical Role licensed comic. If you’re not familiar with Critical Role, it’s a weekly roleplaying game session played by voice actors that airs on Twitch, later offered as a podcast. The “multi-platform entertainment sensation” attracts more than half a million viewers every week and is currently engaged in its third campaign storyline set in the world of Exandria. That, then, is the setting of this comic book series featuring a story by the cast of Critical Role, script by Darcy Van Poelgeest, and art by CoupleofKooks (no, really!). This first issue is largely world building and storyline establishment, opening with a creation story featuring the “first children,” ancient elemental titans, betrayer gods, and a banishment. The Kryn Dynasty (a little on the nose for any Neffers who might be fen of the *Dragonlance* books) emerges from the wreckage, devoted to the Luxon and bonding with it in a ceremony called the Consecution. A force representing the Bright Queen ventures into the Ghostlands, where they are attacked and pulled into the darkness. While enjoyable as a fantasy, I’m not invested enough in the franchise or world of Exandria to find it wholly compelling. Fen of the Twitch show might enjoy it more, and I’m not sure I need to seek out the second issue. I’d rather read the current *Dungeons & Dragons* title. Or, I’d rather play *Dungeons & Dragons* myself.



Fantastic Four #37-38 (Marvel, December 2021-January 2022)

The first issue, #37, is a fun standalone story serving as punctuation between the previous storyline and the next, breaking up the narrative with a Halloween-themed story titled “There Are Monsters



on Yancy Street.” Written by Dan Slott and drawn by Nico Leon, the issue features Jo-Venn, the Kree Chronicle of Blood; and N’Kalla, the Skrull Requiem of the Shapeless Souls; not too long ago adopted by Ben and Alicia Grimm. The two youth use their shapeshifting powers to go trick or treating, donning a number of costumes to collect “twelve times our allotment of our treats.” The Profiteer, proprietor of the Casino Cosmico, sends alien visitors to reclaim the children, her former employees. Once they are defeated—largely because Jo-Venn goes berzerk, killing four aliens—The Thing tells him he doesn’t have to serve as a child soldier any more, that he cannot kill. That becomes important in the next storyline, beginning in #38’s “Family Crisis,” written by Slott and drawn by Francesco Manna. In this new storyline, the Wizard serves Dragon Man with court papers seeking custody of his cloned son Bentley-23. The Fantastic Four and Dragon Man end up in court—overseen by super-powered Judge Payne—and defended by Jen Walters, attorney at law (as well as She-Hulk). The Wizard represents himself, providing evidence that his crimes were all committed by clones, not himself; enlisting Diablo as a witness; and challenging the fitness of Dragon Man, Sue and Reed Richards, and even Ben and Alicia Grimm—citing Jo-Venn’s killing of the four alien visitors—to adequately parent any children. At the end of the issue, it doesn’t look good for anyone. This storyline, while somewhat jokey and far fetched, was challenging to read as someone who’s gone through a child custody evaluation and change in custody, but Slott’s writing—in both issues—is solid and smart. The artwork of Leon and Manna, though excellent, didn’t really intrigue me enough to seek out more of their work. The current ongoing series is worth reading because of Slott, however.

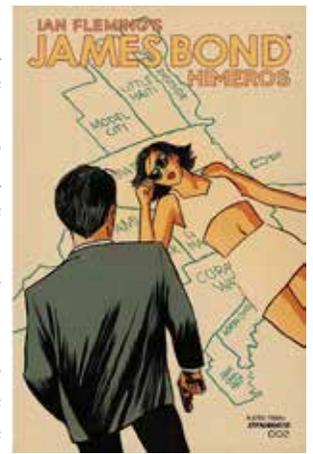


James Bond: Himeros #1-2
(Dynamite, 2021)

The first two issues of this tie-in comic focusing on Ian Fleming’s renowned character seems to be influenced by the story of Jeffrey Epstein. Written by Rodney Barnes and drawn by Antonio Fuso—with excellent covers by Francesco Francavilla—the story details the deployment of Kino, an elite assassin hired by an arms dealer to eradicate people involved in a child trafficking ring who could threaten his legitimate government business. He first kills Richard Wilhelm, an imprisoned billionaire financier (the Epstein character), before turning his attention to Sarah Richmond, once a street urchin of sorts before being taken in by Wilhelm and becoming his right hand (perhaps the Ghislaine Maxwell character). Bond is assigned to bring Richmond in, to gather evidence on Anton Banes, the arms dealer, before

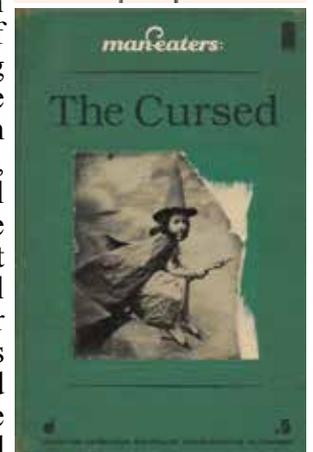
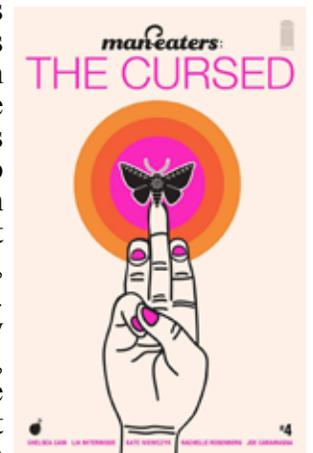


Kino offs her. Meanwhile, a group of Dutch ethno-nationalists led by Banes, are using a video game embedded with “intricate codes, plans, and detailed intelligence” to prepare his clientele for the expected revelation of his involvement so he can take his business underground. The first issue is mostly exposition and action, with Bond trading shots with Cuban assassins sent by Banes to kill Richmond before trying to win her trust and cooperation. The second issue reveals some of the high-tech defenses on Wilhelm’s island and brings Kino and Bond face to face for another satisfying fight scene. There’s even a car chase. “He’s no bodyguard,” quips Kino after the two escape in a fiery car wreck. The comic is a good read and is sure to be enjoyed by Bond fen. But tonally, it reminds me more of Ms. Tree than of Bond, and it’s missing some of the hallmark Bond touchpoints: Q, high-tech gadgetry (in terms of tools Bond uses), and catch phrases. We’ll see where the rest of the series goes!



Man-Eaters: The Cursed #4-5
(Dark Horse, October-November 2021)

The first Man-Eaters series was amazing. In that miniseries, readers were introduced to a society in which people have learned to cope with and established safeguards for young women turning into bloodthirsty giant felines when they reach puberty. It was a smart critique on male-dominated culture, commercialism, and body shame. This new miniseries created by Chelsea Cain and Lia Mitermique, written by Cain, and drawn by Kate Niemczyk—with supplemental art by Mitermique—turns its attention to Craft Camp on an island off the coast of Oregon, where young witches and perhaps warlocks hone their crafts. Readers interested in Man-Eaters generally, paganism, witchcraft, Scouting, and nature will resonate with the book. The storyline is a little challenging to explain but involves frogs, moths, menstrual trees, and a young female camper who helps save other campers lost in the woods. I find Cain and Mitermique’s ideas and alternate societies really compelling, and while the art serves the story well, it is the supplemental art and writing—the tea leaves, note cards, catalog pages, badge tracker, lunch menu, sticky notes, and handwritten reports—that really make the comic reading experience unique. If you’re new to Man-Eaters,

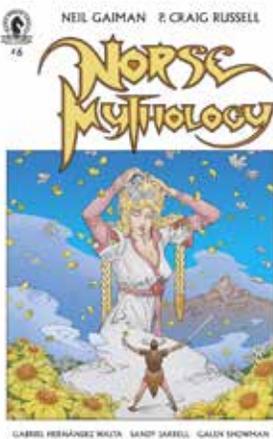
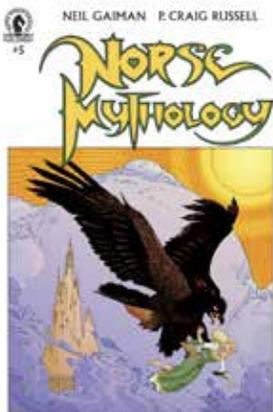


start with the first miniseries, then proceed to this one. The concept here isn't as strong as it was initially, but it's still wonderful and worth exploring. What will they do next?

Norse Mythology Vol. 2, #5-6

(Dark Horse, October-November 2021)

Adapting Neil Gaiman's book *Norse Mythology*, this and the first volume of the comic series continue to bring the ancient tales to new readers. The fifth issue focuses on "The Apples of Immortality," retelling the story of Idunn, Bragi, Loki, Thor, Thiazi, Skadi, and Freya, as gods, giants, and man alike vie for the magic apples. With writing by Gaiman, script and layouts by P. Craig Russell, and art by Gabriel Hernandez Walta, it's a beautiful comic—and given the presence of Thor and Loki, a reader might occasionally wonder why Gaiman hasn't been tapped to write Marvel's Thor yet. One exchange even made me laugh out loud: "Hit him again, Thor!" "Do not hit him, Thor." The sixth issue continues "The Apples of Immortality," as Thiazi's daughter Skadi seeks revenge, marrying Njord, father of Frey and Freya, because his feet are as beautiful as she imagines Balder's to be. In the next tale, "The Story of Gerd and Frey," drawn by Sandy Jarrell, Frey trades the flaming sword of Surtur for the hand of giantess Gerd, who has captured his heart. Each story is in some way a fable, imparting a lesson. In "The Apples of Immortality," we perhaps learn that greed can lead to great evil and that beauty can be deceiving. (The feet just crack me up.) And "The Story of Gerd and Frey" ends with the consummation of true love and a warning: "[H]e should not have given his sword away. Ragnarok is coming." But we're also left with the question: Why hasn't Gaiman been hired to write Thor yet? Maybe these miniseries are just a tryout book. Only time will tell. And these tales are timeless.

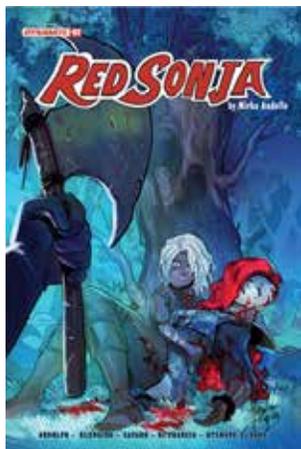


Red Sonja Vol. 6, #2

(Dynamite, October 2021)

I go back and forth on Dynamite's various ongoing series featuring Red Sonja. While I enjoy them, I find myself occasionally dropping the titles from my pull list, only to add them again, missing the female barbarian character created by Robert E. Howard. In fact, I last reviewed Vol. 5, #16-21 in my blog, Media Diet, about a year ago (<https://tinyurl.com/y8ajp3w7>).

This new issue—new series,



and new volume—was written by Mirka Andolfo and Luca Blengino, and drawn by Giuseppe Cafaro. In the current storyline, Sonja finds herself in Brythunia, in the home of a former soldier turned lumberjack and carpenter, Samosh. Her adopted—or adoptive—daughter Sitha brought her there, injured. Sonja is slow to warm to Samosh as a man, but Sitha clearly hopes they will become a "real family." (An interesting pairing with the Fantastic Four issues' exploration of the meaning of family above.) That is not to be, and Sonja and Sitha leave, so Sonja can return her to Zondryck and her people. Having second thoughts in a tavern after the exchange, Sonja returns to reclaim Sitha, only to learn Zondryck sold her to powerful sorcerers. As much as I like Red Sonja, the comic doesn't always hit me as hard as I would like, and this issue strikes me similarly: good as inoculation, but far from a replacement for the original stories. Still, an occasionally entertaining read, even if not worthy of full attention over time.

Red Sonja: Black, White, Red #4

(Dynamite, October 2021)

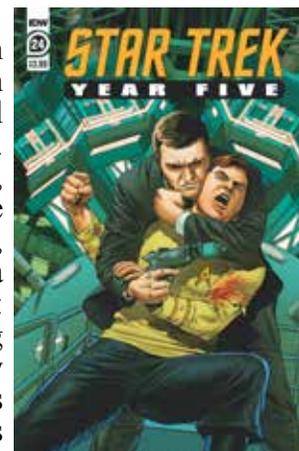
This themed anthology book featuring Red Sonja is a slightly different gambit than the ongoing series above. Featuring three stories—"The Iron Maiden" by Sanya Anwar, Kike J. Diaz, and Hassan Otsmane-Elhaou; "The Iron Queen" by Phillip Kennedy Johnson, Steve Beach, and Otsmane-Elhaou; and "Cold Monger" by Chuck Brown, Drew Moss, and Otsmane-Elhaou—the book is printed in black, white, and red to accentuate Sonja's red hair—and the blood spilled. (In a way, the coloring is reminiscent of the use of red in the movie adaptation of Frank Miller's *Sin City*.) Of the three stories, "The Iron Queen" was my favorite, with its more realistic stippled artwork somewhat in the style of Richard Corben. The use of slightly gothic typeset text was particularly effective, and reading the story reminded me of reading the black-and-white *Savage Sword of Conan* magazine. Steve Beach's artwork was absolutely wonderful.



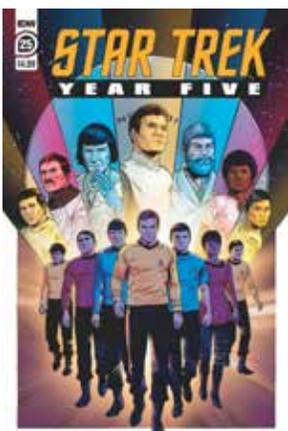
Star Trek: Year Five #24-25

(IDW, June-July 2021)

I previously reviewed #10 in this series in *Tightbeam* #306. In this ongoing tie-in series, we're still focusing on Year Five of the U.S.S. Enterprise's Original Series mission, but we're no longer in #10's storyline focused on Hikaru Sulu, the I'Qosa, and the Lo'Kari. We've also got a somewhat different creative team: #24 was written by Jackson Lanzing and Collin Kelley, and drawn by Silvia Califano; and #25—perhaps the final issue in the series—was written by Jackson Lanzing, Collin Kelly, Jody Houser, Paul Cornell, Jim McCann, and Brandon



Easton; and drawn by Carlos Nieto, Califano, Angel Hernandez, Megan Levens, and Christopher Jones. That's a lot of people! A mysterious—for those who haven't been keeping up with the series—character named Seven is racing through time trying to kill Captain Kirk at various points in his history, with Kirk chasing him in an effort to stop him from doing so. Meanwhile, the Tholians threaten the Enterprise. Spock, currently in command, persuades them to take aboard a survivor of their alien species, who attempts to reason with them and convince them that they can learn much from other species—and the Federation. Kirk and Seven discuss the trap that can be laid by the duty and honor—the vengeance—of independence. In #25, then, the Tholians team up with the Federation to rebuild Lloy-Zeta 9, Spock leaves the Federation, McCoy decides to turn down a new assignment, Kirk makes Admiral, and Scott and Uhura meet cute. It's a busy wrap-up issue, or feels like one, with multiple contributors. The backstory on Seven's chase through time might be worth exploring, but otherwise, the end of the mission—and effectively, the Original Series feels anticlimactic. And I'm not sure Scott and Uhura make sense to me as a romantic pairing. Regardless, a solid tie-in comic that's worth exploring.



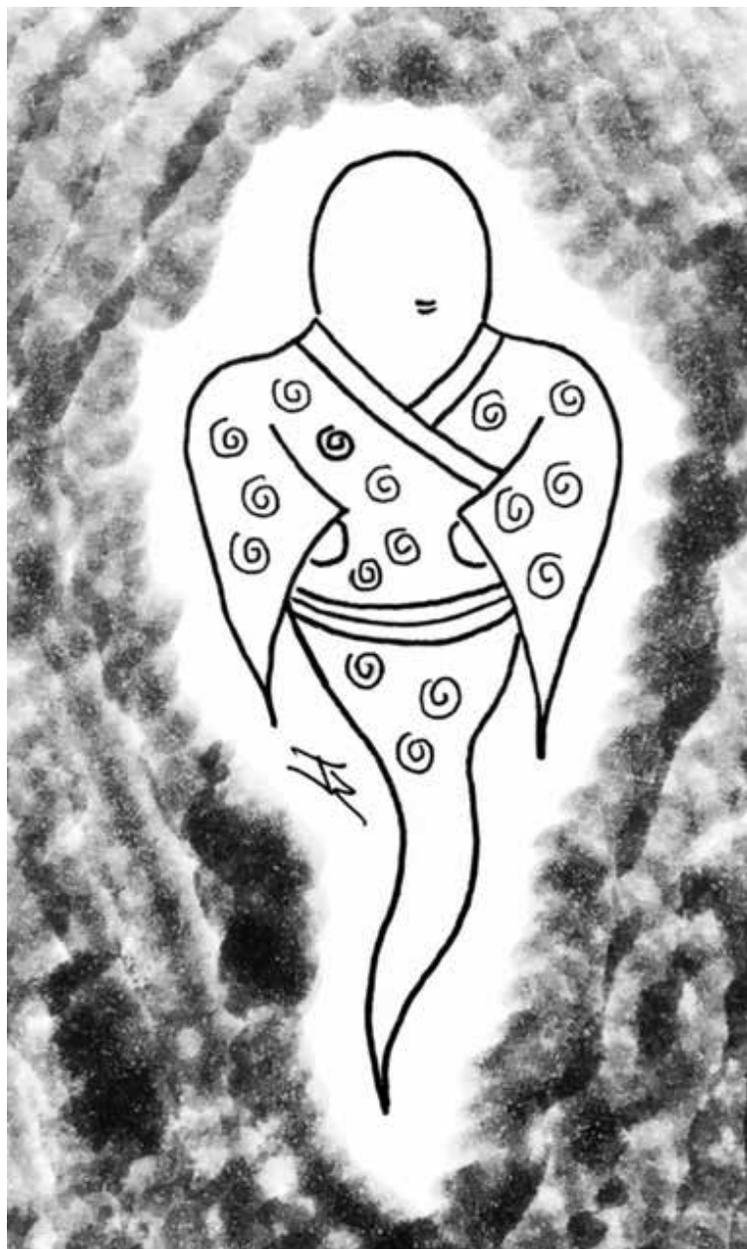
A brief coda follows the bulk of the issue. During a community service outreach program, reporter Ben Urich—who's been investigating the X-Men and their new island nation Krakoa—confronts Cyclops to ask whether the X-Men have “solved for death.” The conversation is witnessed by an unidentified figure who wears a helmet (as seen on the issue's cover by Pepe Larraz and Marte Garcia). It's been awhile since I've read X-Men, so, as always, it's a bit much to plunge right back into, but the issue offers several charming moments: the page featuring Polaris and Rogue in the Proudstar flying toward the sun, the sealmeranian punctuation, Wolverine's blase response to Polaris manipulating her while she was unconscious, a C.H.U.D. reference, and some gentle multilingualism. And I'm intrigued by the house ad insert promoting the Fantastic Four Reckoning War event, which features the Watcher, who apparently returned from the dead last fall. Go figure. There's always something hopping in the Marvel Universe.

— Heath Row

X-Men #5

(Marvel, January 2022)

The X-Men have deployed to Mexico, to stop the Reavers from disrupting elections. Unfortunately, hired by autocrats, the Reavers come armed with darts that interfere with the X-gene. They're nonlethal, but the newly constituted team has taken a beating, and practically all are down for the count. Luckily, Polaris seems to be unaffected and manipulates a fallen Wolverine (the female Wolverine, Laura Kinney, or X-23, for those of you who've been away for awhile) to rejoin the fight before removing the iron from the blood and the iron fillings from the teeth of the Reavers. Magneto would be pleased! In the end, the rest of the team revives, and the election is able to proceed unmolested. But it's a crisis of faith for Polaris. The issue—written by Gerry Duggan and drawn by Javier Pina and Ze Carlos (under the tutelage of Jonathan Hickman, “Head of X”)—is peppered with flashbacks in which Polaris almost decides not to join the X-Men again; narrowly averts a radioactive disaster; and is thought to have killed a cute but harmless “sealmeranian,” a seal terrier of sorts, controlled by Dr. Stasis. In the end, after a conversation with Marvel Girl, Polaris writes Northstar (in a characteristic Hickman-style full page of typewritten text) to encourage him to seek membership. “[T]hey'd be lucky to have you, and the world needs you,” she writes.



Shiro-bōzu by Jim Reddy

Hello and welcome to my manga review column. The title of the column, *Manga no Mori* (Manga Forest) comes from the name of a Japanese manga shop chain that I shopped at regularly when I was living in Japan. They went out of business years ago but I have fond memories of the place. Besides selling manga they imported American comic books and I'm a big fan of both. I'll be reviewing mostly older manga but I like all sorts of stuff so who knows what may show up. On to the reviews!

The Birth of Kitaro by Shigeru Mizuki

(Drawn and Quarterly, 2016)

Translation, Introduction, and Yokai Files by Zack Davisson

The Birth of Kitaro is a collection of stories serving as an introduction to Kitaro and the world of Yōkai. It Reprints seven stories from 1966-1968, including Kitaro's origin story. Two bonus sections are included, a Yōkai Files section and a game section for younger readers.

Kitaro and the other characters are Yōkai, a kind of Japanese spirit monster from Japanese folklore. Kitaro is a Yōkai boy born in a cemetery. He fights for peace between Yōkai and humans.

The stories follow his adventures as he interacts with other characters from Japanese, Chinese, and Western folklore and mythology. The other main characters include Medama-oyaji, Kitaro's father reborn as an eyeball, and Nezumi Otoko (Rat Man), a rodent-like creature who was the first Yōkai to befriend Kitaro. Although he is usually a friend and ally, Nezumi Otoko often causes trouble with his get rich schemes and he will side with an enemy if he thinks the enemy is powerful. There is also Neko Musume (Cat Girl), a Yōkai girl who can shapeshift into a cat-like form with fangs and feline eyes. Of course Nezumi Otoko and Neko Musume don't get along.

The collection begins with History of Kitaro Part 1 which covers the history of Yōkai from the Edo period to the Showa period. The history is continued in further volumes.

The Birth of Kitaro

From *Garo*, March 1966

Mizuki, a businessman that works at a blood bank is told by his boss that they mixed some Yōkai blood into their blood supply. The boss wants him to investigate. Mizuki tracks the donor down to an abandoned temple and discovers two Yōkai, the last two surviving members of the Ghost Tribe. They tell him the history of Yōkai and ask for his help. By the end of the story we meet Kitaro and his father, who now inhabits one of Kitaro's eyeballs. We see Kitaro as a baby and as a little boy but he is drawn a little differently than in most

other stories.

I found it interesting that Shigeru Mizuki seems to have used American comics as reference for two of the characters. A number of panels of the businessman look to be referenced from the story "Amnesia" by Warren Kremmer from the May 1953 issue of Chamber of Chills, and Kitaro's father, before he becomes the eyeball version (pictured on the cover), looks to be referenced from "Servants of the Tomb" by Bob Powell from the November 1951 issue of Witches Tales.

Nezumi Otoko Versus Neko Musume

From *Shonen Special Edition*, September 1, 1967

Nezumi-Otoko's latest scheme involves cheating the elderly out of their life savings. Emma Dai-O, the king of the underworld, orders Kitaro to stop him. Kitaro enlists the aid of Neko Musume.

Nopperabo

From *Shonen Weekly*, May 5, 1968

The Yōkai Nopperabo steals Nezumi Otoko's face and Kitaro helps him get it back. This story is a good example of the kind of humor sometimes found in Kitaro. Kitaro gets the face back from Nopperabo but there's a struggle and Kitaro accidentally swallows it. He tells Nezumi Otoko that he'll have to wait for it to come out the other end.

Gyuki

From *Shonen Weekly*, December 15, 1968

Kitaro and Nezumi Otoko deal with a Gyuki, a massive Yōkai with a crab-like body and bull-like head that is threatening a seaside town.

Yokai of the Mountain Pass

From *Shonen Weekly*, November 19, 1967

A Buru-Buru, a Yōkai that causes chills and shudders when no one is around, is causing car accidents in the mountains. The people of a mountain town ask Kitaro for help.

Makura Gaeshi

From *Shonen Weekly*, January 14, 1968

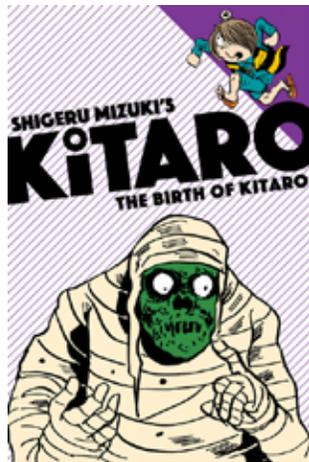
A young boy is kidnapped by the Yōkai Makura Gaeshi and brought into the world of dreams. In order to rescue the boy, Kitaro uses dream sandals that enable him to walk on a rainbow and enter the dream world. This Yōkai uses sand to make people fall asleep. This story really felt like a Yōkai version of Neil Gaiman's Sandman.

Hideri Gami

From *Shonen Weekly*, May 26, 1968

A comic book publisher decides that their yokai comic book needs to be written by an actual Yōkai to increase sales. Nezumi Otoko teams up with Hideri Gami, a Yōkai who burns with fire and evaporates water, to try and swindle the company.

Overall this is a fun read and a nice introduction to the works of Shigeru Mizuki.



Tono Monogatari

by Shigeru Mizuki

(Drawn and Quarterly, 2021)

Translation, Introduction, and
Yokai Files by Zack Davisson

Shigeru Mizuki, creator of *GeGeGe no Kitaro*, adapts ***Tono Monogatari***, a famous book of folk legends. The legends were originally gathered from Tono, Iwate prefecture in Japan by Kunio Yanagita.

The legends vary in length, some are quite short just fragments, while others are a little longer. Characters are drawn in Mizuki's usual cartoony style. The backgrounds which include mountains, forests, and thatched huts are drawn in a realistic style. The art is gorgeous and atmospheric.

There are also five essays by translator Zack Davisson which are spread out throughout this volume which provide a lot of background information regarding the legends. I quite enjoyed reading them as they were informative and fun to read.

The essays cover the following topics:

Concerning Mountains

On Kami and Yōkai

Animals and the Supernatural

The Warden of the North

On Foxes and Folk Tales

Shigeru Mizuki worked on this later in his career after he retired from regular work. The stories are told in an autobiographical way, as if Mizuki was traveling through Tono late in his life. This volume comes across as a real labor of love.

— Jim Reddy

You can find Jim at:

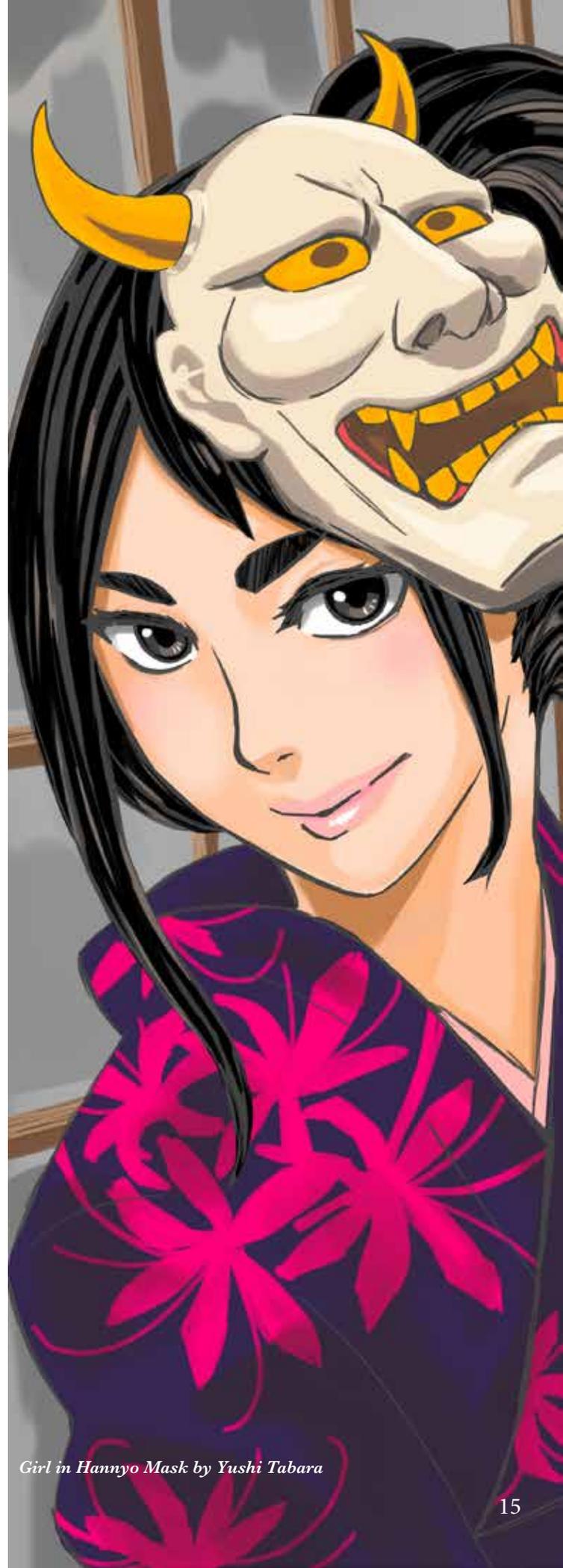
Blog: <https://welearnbywritingblogspot.com>

Twitter: @jimreddy

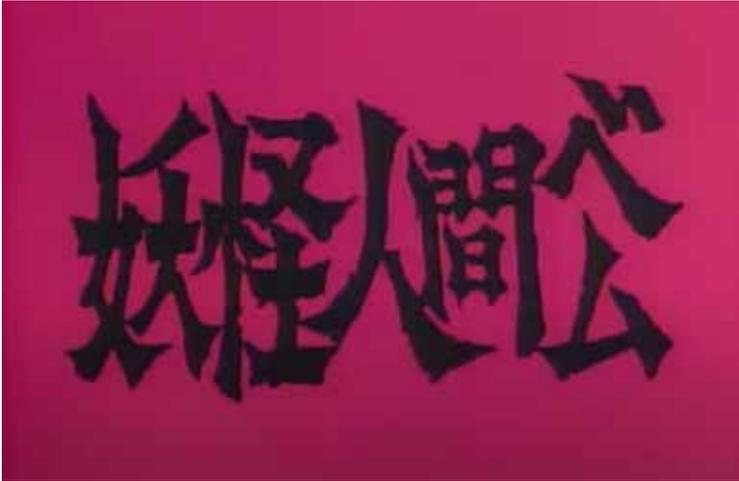
IG: burymeinmanga and burymeinbooks_



Kitaro's House by Jim Reddy



Girl in Hannya Mask by Yushi Tabara



Background

Yokai Ningen Bem translated as Humanoid Monster Bem, Demon-man Bem is an animated property that originally ran from 1968 to 1969 on the Fuji TV network. It was remade and rebooted several times as animated and live action series as well as animated and live action movies. We can get a decent idea of the story from the opening introduction and theme song.

Introduction

No one knows when they were born.

From a dark, soundless world, one cell continued to split resulting in the birth of three creatures.

Of course, they weren't human. Nor were they human.

But hidden within the DNA of their hideous bodies was a sense of justice.

The creatures that weren't able to achieve humanity were Yokai Ningen (Monster/Human hybrids).

Opening Song

Hiding in the dark we live

We are the Monster/Human hybrids!

We mustn't let people see our beastly bodies

Bem: "I can't wait to become human!"

Throwing worries of their dark fate to the wind,

BEM, BELA, BELO are the Monster/Human hybrids!

The characters

The only recurring characters are the trio Bem, Bela, and Belo. All born at the same time, but have taken on forms which fit their personality and relationships. They all have humanoid and monstrous forms, the monstrous forms being their original forms though they spend much of their time as humanoids. They all have two fingers

and a thumb on each hand, and have individual supernatural powers.



In humanoid form, Bem is tall with dark skin, no hair, and completely white eyes. He wears a black trenchcoat, black hat with a white band, red shirt with white cravat, and carries a white cane which he often uses as a weapon. BEM is a euphemism for alien based on the acronym Bug-Eyed Monster though his eyes aren't bugged-out or very bug-like. In monstrous form, he has a brown head and body with two bulbous protrusions resembling an oversized brain, and his body looks stronger and his claws longer. Bem is the wisest of the three and acts like a father figure to the other two, often protecting or chastising when necessary. We don't know why, but Bem is convinced that by helping humans and fighting evil, the three will someday become human.



Bela has pale skin, long dark hair, full lips and turned up eyes that are yellow with black irises. She wears a purple full-length gown much like a toga with a red sash and also wears a red and green cape. Her weapon is a gold-colored whip that is wrapped around her wrist when not in use. Bela resembles the vampire bride from Lon Chaney Sr. in the silent movie *London After Midnight*, though she was probably named after Bela Lugosi who played Dracula on stage and film. In monstrous form, her hair is long and red and her body is ribbed like a crocodile's underside while her face is almost dog-like. Though she is motherly towards Belo, she is more like an older sister and has no romantic relationship with Bem. She really hates

bad guys and often goes a bit too far when fighting with them. Bem often has to keep her in check. She is impatient about becoming human and trusts in Bem's belief that it will happen if she does good deeds.



Belo resembles a pixie with pointed ears and blue hair. His eyes are yellow and black like Bela and he wears a red unitard with a blue belt. Belo, whose name is similar to regional Japanese slang for tongue, resembles Bem when in monstrous form, but with a green body. Belo wants more than anything to make friends. Most episodes begin with Belo getting involved with other kids that end up needing his help. He's a true innocent, honest and trusting and often gets his feelings hurt when humans reject him after seeing his monstrous form which he changes into only to help those humans.

They usually lay low during the day hiding in caves, underground lairs, crematoriums and such and stay on the move at night. They rarely feel safe in one place, especially after Belo has gotten himself involved with some locals. Sometimes the three fight regular bad guys, while other times they face supernatural foes. Sometimes, humans are grateful or friendly, while other times they are rejected by the people they help.

The setting

The original series is set in various locations across Europe, sometimes in modern cities and other times in tiny rural villages that seem like they're from another century. No matter where they go, they always manage to find evil and fight it hoping to one day be rewarded with humanity.

Episodes and commentary

Titles marked with (*) have been changed from titles considered to use inconsiderate language. Some dialog has been altered or removed as well. By doing a search using the Japanese titles below, one can easily find YouTube videos to watch along with the story breakdowns.



- 1 恐怖の貨物列車
Horror freight train
Broadcast: 10/7/1968

Story:

Peter the Orphan is waylaid by a former circus trick shooting woman on his way to be adopted by his rich grandparents. He's tossed in the swamp to die and replaced by another boy under the orders of an evil woman. Belo saves Peter and hides him in the graveyard where he lives in secret with Bela and Bem. Bela causes the woman to see several horrific illusions causing her to faint. Apparently, when she wakes up, she'll be a better person. The yokai trio believe that helping humans will allow them to become human someday as well. Even though Bela saved his bacon, Belo did pretty good on his own fighting against the evil woman's henchmen.

Commentary:

The setting is vaguely European. Transportation is modern, but locations often seem from another century. The character design for the show is unique even for the period. Kids and adults often look slightly grotesque. This show possibly popularized the word yokai even more than GeGeGe no Kitaro. The opening song is pretty catchy with a jazzy feel and sung by the Honey Knights who sang the Sasuke anime theme song, the Godzilla vs. the Smog Monster theme, as well as the Japanese theme for Thunderbirds. The ending, "Belo is a Friend" sung by YAMADA Yoshiko, focuses on Belo wanting to make human friends—a theme of the show that drives many of the narratives—but adults only see him as a monster. Actually, it's not always the adults that reject Belo's friendship.

- 2 階段を這う手首*
Hand Crawling on the Stairs
10/14/1968



Story:

The trio hide in an old house from the rain when two assassins come to the house. The assassins are planning to kill a child. Bem says that though they (Bem and company) look like monsters, their hearts are pure unlike the mother in this episode who has paid assassins to kill her kid so that she can claim his fortune. In the end all the bad guys are dispatched, but apparently, when the mom awakens after the attack, she'll somehow be a better person(?). That's an interesting power that they have that the trio of yokai can reform people out of fear (or by kicking their asses). Even so, the boy they save rejects Belo's friendship.

Commentary:

In each episode, after the opening song, there is an explanation of how the trio were created, growing from cells into something not human or animal. Almost but not human as if that was what they were supposed to be, but couldn't quite reach their full potential. The three want to become human more than anything else, to be accepted by humankind. In this episode, Bela makes an impassioned speech about how the wait to become human is unbearable. No matter how hard they fight bad guys, they are never understood by humans. From my point of view, though they'd have trouble assimilating, they'd do better to stay in their powerful monster forms and just pretend to be human. They already act more humane than many.

3 死びとの町
Town of the Dead
10/21/1968

Story:

This story had a great twist. The monstrous trio, or The Monstrio (yeah!), are hiding in a crematorium and are sleeping through the day in preparation for a move to another town that evening. On the 13th of every month, a child is

taken from the town by a mysterious force and never seen from again. At the same time, the men of the town disappear for a few days. It's Emily's turn next, but her mom doesn't want to bring her to the well to be sacrificed, but if she doesn't, everyone in the whole town will be slaughtered. Belo befriends Emily and decides to help her. Bela also goes to the well to discover the source of the mystery. There she finds the children playing happily and with them, the men of the village. Bela learns that many years ago, a homeless woman came into the village asking for food but was ignored by the village women and she died. Her ghost appears on the 13th of every month and takes over all the women of the village causing them to attack the men and children. This is why the men take the children and disappear on the 13th. Bela fights the ghost and is making no progress until Bem, back in the crematorium, finds a glowing skull. He smashes it and the spirit of the woman disappears for good. This is one episode where the humans, especially Emily, seem to appreciate the help that The Monstrio have provided.

Commentary:

As I was watching the opening of this one, it occurred to me that the three all started from a single cell. In a way, they are three different aspects of the human psyche. Id, Ego, and Superego. Belo is like the Id. He has little control and gets bored easily. He wants friendship even though he knows it puts The Monstrio in danger. Ego-like Bela desperately desires to be human, but keeps such desires under control, often with the support of Bem, the objective moral voice of the Superego. It's important that they are a trio, all with three-fingered hands, and not a duo in that they push against simple binary thinking. I remember my encounter with the uncanny when I first saw the aliens in The War of the World movies, and learned that they were a trinary race with three eyes and three legs and I tried to understand what that difference might mean to how they viewed the world. Character designs of people with three or

four fingers are discouraged in Japan. I remember being told this directly when showing some of my designs. I'm not clear on exactly where this idea started, that representing characters with less than five fingers had a negative connotation, but it's still a consideration to this day.



4 せむし男の人魂*
Soul of the Hunchback
10/28/1968

Story:

A strange spirit possesses an otherwise friendly cop who sends Gil, a criminal in his custody, out to assassinate Belo who has just made a new friend. The friend and Belo are both thrown off the side of a mountain, but Belo lands on an outcropping and the friend, a boy named John Lancaster is luckily caught on a branch. John's father finds the boys and climbs down a rope to Belo. Belo says he'll rescue John and sends his dad back up. Later, Belo is close to death, but is nursed back to health by the Lancasters. Gil comes calling to their house trying to get them to release Belo to him, but Mr. Lancaster refuses. Later, the police come for the same thing, but Lancaster still won't give Belo up! Meanwhile, Bela takes on the spirit which is the vengeful ghost of a hunchback who was caught by a priest for murdering several people and thus imprisoned. The hunchback says he "hates humans" and knew that The Monstrio would foil his plans of destroying the Lancasters who for the last year have lived in the house that the hunchback died in. He immobilizes Bela, but Bem fights him and destroys his skull thus destroying the spirit and also releasing the cop from its spell.

Commentary:

One thing I want to mention is how far the Lancasters are willing to go to protect Belo. They are honorable people who would rather do the right

thing than avoid trouble with the police. When The Monstrio say that they want to be human, these are the kind of humans they wish to become. Of course, if people accepted them as they are, they wouldn't need to have human bodies as their hearts are already more pure than most of the people they meet. Now, the hunchback is an interesting character because he is merely a man with an overly curved spine, but his heart is so poisoned that he considers himself a monster. There is no indication that he is treated as or called a monster due to his disability, and every indication that he is a monster because he commits evil acts. Yet, he says he hates humans meaning he doesn't consider himself a human. Perhaps this is connected to Lon Chaney Sr.'s portrayal of Quasimodo in the silent film *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*. The make-up for the character makes Quasi look hideous, but is he a monster? Not by far. It is the people that treat him poorly that are the true monsters of the story, yet he gets lumped in with Sr.'s other iconic monsters as an example of a Movie Monster. As this show is concerned with three 'monsters' who don't act as such, it doesn't seem to be saying that the hunchback is a monster because of his hump, but that it's his hate and murderous actions that make him monstrous. A lot more to unpack than I expected from a TV show over 50 years old, but then this was a special production.



5 マネキン人形の首
Mannequin Head
11/4/1968

Story:

Mannequin heads are creepy for sure, but this time, it's just a plain ol' mannequin head that fell off a mannequin truck. Belo almost destroys it, but realizes it's quite cute and he tries to bring it back to the owner. There he meets Lily, the model for the head and the daughter of Monk, the mannequin creator. Monk used to be a safecracker, and his old boss Geronimo is trying to get him back in the game. Monk refuses as he's a father now and

he doesn't want his daughter to know about his past. Belo tries to help and when Geronimo brings Monk's diary to the police, Belo gets blamed for the deed by Lily. Belo is as honest as the day is long and tells Lily that he is often hated for being a monster because he looks like one. He then shows her his monstrous form and tells her that now that she's seen the real him, he has to go. Lily has an immediate change of heart and accepts Belo and his version of events. The Monstrio then fight off the bad guys with Geronimo getting impaled on a tree by Bela. She often goes too far in her hatred of evil, you see. Bem chastises her and she restores him to life saying that when he wakes up, he'll have been reformed.

Commentary:

It's a real high point of the series so far in regards to meeting good humans. Lily is really into him too, kissing him on the cheek and such. It's too bad that Belo feels that he has to leave after revealing his true nature, but of course the series would have to take a completely new direction instead of the misunderstood heroes always wandering until they've done enough good acts to become human. This is the second time that Bela has been able to reform someone through her attacks though it's interesting that she gets a do-over and "un-kills" Geronimo. One of my favorite episodes so far.

him. Bem reveals that the bull head is really just a prop for the priestess who is actually a monstrous ghoul. She has gathered the cult members together merely to eat their innards. Bem shows the cultists her real form and then fights her to the death. At the end, Bem warns his companions that even though the bull head was a fake, there are lots of hidden enemies that humans have no idea of.

Commentary:

This is an episode where I felt that the character design must be deliberately grotesque. Then I thought, maybe they are supposed to represent exaggerated foreign features? It does seem to take place in vague European or even Slavic locales. They could have easily made Bela a beautiful monster, but instead chose to overemphasize her eyes making them look sharply slanted and yellow. Her original design was more svelte, her facial features more typically beautiful, but I suppose they wanted to make sure that Bela had to face the same difficulties of acceptance as Bem and Belo might. To me, she looks just like the vampire bride from *London After Midnight*, another Lon Chaney Sr. silent classic (the film itself is lost, but the script and several stills exist and it's quite an interesting mystery with a very non-supernatural twist). The use of Satan in Japanese film, TV, and comics is very curious. Often, characters with this name are no more than "monster of the week" types and rarely portrayed as an all-powerful absolute ruler of the underworld with enough power to challenge the Christian god. A fear of The Devil is a given in western media, but Lucifer just doesn't seem to have the same ability to scare in the East.



6 悪魔のろうそく*
The Devil's Candle
11/11/1968

Story:

It starts with two gang-members coming to join a cult of Satan worshipers. The cult is fronted by an evil-looking priestess and Satan is represented by a huge bloody bull head on a dais. The younger gang-member doesn't believe in Satan and as a result is reduced to bones which are then dropped into a big soup. Belo infiltrates the cult but is quickly found out and Bem and Bela have to rescue



7 呪いの幽霊船
Cursed Ghost Ship
11/18/1968

Story:

The story starts with The Monstrio staying in a cave which is in a tall crag sticking out of the ocean just offshore. The nearby town is panicking

because of the appearance of a ghost ship. Belo is on the shore watching the ship when a man in a dilapidated suit is walking down a pier. He is being called by the ship and can't seem to stop himself from jumping into the water. His movements are erratic and uncanny, but just the idea that he's not in control of himself is pretty creepy. Belo jumps in to pull the man out of the water and leaves as townspeople arrive. When the man is flipped over, there is a disembodied skeletal hand grasping at the man's throat. An important boss, an enforcer, and a henchman, all obviously bad men, are talking about previous favors done for each other. The boss wants the enforcer to take care of the ghost ship somehow as he's been having bad dreams since it appeared. It's all connected to some past event that involves the boss's wife Laura who has lost her memory of it. The enforcer hears her scream and runs to where she's fainted. A huge ogre-like being is in the woods watching and the enforcer scares it away with gunfire. He refers to it as a kaiju. Both the boss and enforcer seem genuinely concerned about Laura.

The captain of the ghost ship appears in front of the ogre and tosses a chicken with a broken neck at its feet and the ogre bites its head right off! [This is a kids show, right?] The two then dis-apparate returning to the ghost ship under the watchful eye of Belo. A small boy appears playing kick the rock. Belo hides him in an alley as the enforcer and henchman arrive. Belo worries about the boy's safety so decides to lead the two gang members away. The enforcer tosses a lasso and catches Belo, but before he can shoot him, the little boy has thrown a rock at the would-be assassin. The enforcer uses up all his bullets shooting at Belo and the boy just when the ogre appears. It smacks Belo to the ground, kidnaps the boy, and dis-apparates. The gunman now has more bullets and he wounds Belo in the shoulder thinking that he's somehow connected to the ghost ship. As he won't listen to reason, Belo goes full yokai and attacks him and escapes. Belo decides to make his way onto the ship where the captain in skeletal form gives him such a fright that he falls through the deck and ends up face to face with the huge ogre. He then falls backwards through a wall and lands on some wine barrels knocking a cork free. From the barrel a bunch of bones start pouring forth forming a skeleton. Wherever he goes he is hounded by the skeletons so he escapes and hides in an empty chest. He hears the sound of conflict and looks through the keyhole to see a bunch of pirates fighting each other with swords.

After being forced from his hiding place, the captain tells him that they are all cursed, and the only way to return to human form is to kill as many people as possible. The exact opposite of what The Monstrio feel they have to do to achieve humanity. Just when the crew has Belo

and the captain is about to kill him good, the boy appears! The boy says he lives there and then tells the captain to leave his friend alone. The captain complies and then orders his crew, now looking more like dessicated corpses, to enter the town the next day and kill everyone in the town. [Everyone? EV-REE-ONE!! (He doesn't say it like that. I'm just channeling Gary Oldman.)] The boy's grandpa appears looking like a corpse, but then removes his mask [(ROOBY ROOBY-ROO!!)] to reveal he's human. [Curioser and curioser.]

We learn that the old man is the former mayor of the town and has sold his soul to the captain of the ghost ship in order to get revenge on the town. It seems that the new mayor (the boss) tried to kill the old man, his daughter (Laura), her husband, and their baby (the small boy). The husband was killed, the old man and baby jumped into the ocean and were saved by the ghost ship, while Laura was captured by the new mayor. The old man tried to see her, but she lost all memory of her family. The enforcer and his gang of henchmen board the ship, and are attacked by an army of skeletons. They are defeated and given to the ogre to be eaten (and we assume that the ogre does what he did to the chicken).

Meanwhile, Laura asks the new mayor about her past. Belo sings the kick the stone song to Laura and she remembers everything. She tries to escape with Belo, but the new mayor shoots her right in the back(!!!). Belo is PISSED. He goes full yokai and chases after the evil bastard screeching the whole time. Just when Belo has been driven back with fire and is about to be burned, a ghost hand has buried a blade in the new mayor's back. The mayor's mansion catches fire signaling the end of his evil reign. Back on the ship, the captain tells the old mayor that since he's got his revenge, he'll now take possession of the old man's soul. Ok, here's where Bela and Bem will appear and destroy the ghosts, you think, but no! The old man sends the boy away with Belo to take him to his parents recuperating in the hospital (that's a relief) and that's the end. Back at the cave, Bem sees Belo grieving over the old man's fate and comments that he's gained some valuable hard-life experience.

Commentary:

So many questions about this one! First, there's a whole lotta story getting in the way of the plot (as Joe Bob Briggs would say). Also, Bela's features in this episode seem a bit softer than in her first appearance for some reason. Why did the old man wear a mask? So that the captain's crew wouldn't try to kill him? I thought the revenge was on the whole town, but the town wasn't really in danger I guess? What's with the flesh-eating ogre? It's totally black like some kind of hell-hound. It has a name, Busu, when, except Laura, no other character does. This ep has lots of interesting surprises, but is not the

most coherent tale. It's probably the creepiest one so far with the chicken head and gang member-eating ogre, the sweet old grandpa selling his immortal soul for revenge, Laura getting shot right in the spine and crippled for life most likely, the eternally happy little boy who is probably a future basket case waiting to happen. Then you have Bem and Bela not lifting a finger to help. Not just Belo, but the viewers also must have gone through some trauma watching this one. I know I did.



8 吸血鬼の寺
Temple of the Vampires
11/25/1968

Story:

This story starts with an earthquake that unearths a mysterious underground temple. Three waterworks employees get stuck underground and chased by monsters from the temple. Belo also finds an underground tunnel to a wing of a prison. In one cell is a strange man who professes his innocence and convinces Belo to break the special lock to his cell. At first glance, I thought the mark on the lock was a swastika and assumed the prisoner was a nazi war criminal or something, but actually it was a manji, the Buddhist symbol that the swastika was based on. Belo breaks the lock and frees the strange man and another man who tags along and they escape to where the mysterious temple has appeared. We find that the strange man is actually a vampire-like monster and his monster mother (who is very Rankin-Bass-looking) and they try to kill Belo and the tagalong. Belo is bit, but stakes the vampire as it attacks the tagalong guy. Bela shows up, but unfortunately her whip is of no use against the old vampire woman. Bem then shows up and knows exactly what to do. He throws his cane into a coffin lying against the wall and it impales the mummy inside thus defeating her. [There is a lot of impaling in this series. It solves all monster-y

dilemmas.] After they all escape, the tagalong guy thanks Belo for saving him and decides to turn himself in and finish out his sentence.

Commentary:

Let's take a closer look at the opening this time. Three separate bubbles erupt into blobs of cells that recombine and mix and separate as the narration notes that the three entities started from the same single cell before becoming creatures that aren't human, but not quite animal either. It also mentions how the beings basically "have justice ingrained in their DNA" which makes me curious about free will. Can they help wanting to do good? Maybe they can't and maybe Bem's conviction that there must be a reason for that compunction, that it will lead to their salvation (ie. becoming human). Perhaps they feel that they want an immortal soul like the little mermaid in Andersen's story, thus achieving a kind of immortality. The fact is that they are much more durable and powerful in their humanoid yokai bodies. They just won't be accepted in human society and thus may never settle down and have a home. BTW, there are some creepy shots in this ep, like lots of Buddhist-like statues with evil grins and such and a bloody chicken running around with no head that is then eaten by a snake. Honestly, I want to thank the snake for putting that chicken out of its misery! It was seriously freaking me out.



9 すすり泣く鬼婆
The Weeping Onibaba
12/2/1968

Story:

Belo hitches a ride during a rainstorm with a mother and blind son who graciously invite him in their carriage and dry him off. They end up staying at a strange lady's house (strange because she doesn't blink) though Belo decides to head back to Bem and Bela. On the way back he sees some bones and decides to check out the lady realizing she must be the rumored onibaba (demon lady)

as her human-looking face is just a mask. We find that she is a monstrous woman who worships Satan (a goat/cow skull with curved long horns) and is asking what it would take to make her beautiful. Should I sacrifice one of my guests? Two? Three? Satan doesn't answer so she assumes three, the mother, blind son, and the carriage driver. She's obviously operating under a delusion with absolutely no confirmation, that killing more people will get her what she wants, to look beautiful. This is a mirrored idea of The Monstrio's quest where they are doing good with no guarantee that it will result in their gaining humanity. After Bem and Belo dispatch the onibaba and free the mother and child, the carriage driver calls Belo a monster in cahoots with the demon lady and the mother notices Belo's two-fingered (and thumb) hands and rejects him. The blind kid also believes what his mom is saying not realizing that it is Belo who set them free. Afterwards, Belo is crying and Bem tells Bela that it will be okay. That justice is its own reward and Belo will realize that, but it seems clear that Bem is not seeing just how hurt Belo is.

Commentary:

From a monster theory standpoint, onibaba is a Japanese demon woman who represents the monsterization of the old widow who supposedly no longer serves a function contributing to society, but instead lives alone just doing her own thing. Instead of society just leaving her alone, she is vilified and hated. In the west, this kind of woman is sometimes burned at the stake as a witch. This monsterization of women is a constant theme in folklore and mythology (see Medusa). Well, this is not that. This is an anachronistic tale with Hammer Horror candelabras and horse-drawn carriages right alongside modern cars and clothes. After watching this series from the '60s, the much more recent iterations of Bela and Belo make a lot more sense. They question Bem's convictions and are ready to reject the idea of becoming human and are pessimistic about there even being a way to become human. Still, helping people is better than sacrificing them to a goat head on your mantle



that doesn't even acknowledge your existence.

10 墓場の妖怪博士

Yokai Professor of the Graveyard

12/9/1968

Story:

A gang leader named Golem makes his way through a haunted graveyard to meet a certain scientist named Dr. Monstore whom he wants to create a powerful monster/human hybrid for him that will obey his every command and he's willing to pay 100 billion (a hundred billion what? We don't know). He sees Bela in action and decides he wants something similar. He knows that Monstore has created monsters before and asks for something like Bela, but one who's evil through and through. The Monstrio were created to be good, so this can't be the same person who created them. The evil Dr. Monstore has made a replica of Bela with slightly pinker skin, but otherwise the same down to the whip she has wrapped around her wrist. Oh, and she LOVES doing evil. Monstore asks for payment and Golem gives him a shot in the gut and then in the chest til he's dead, dead, dead. Golem and Faux Bela then commit several crimes amassing tons of stolen cash. Belo sees Faux Bela doing a heist and reports what he saw to Bem and Bela. Faux Bela and Golem's gang are evading the police and heading toward where Golem is hiding out in Monstore's mansion when the true Bela in monstrous form confronts them. Faux Bela tries to gun Monster Bela down, but MB is too quick. Faux Bela accidentally guns down her own men. Bela then takes out a mirror and captures Faux Bella's image in it, then eats the mirror causing Faux B to choke. One of the shot gang members aims at MB but misses and hits FB causing her to revert to primordial ooze. Later, Bem has Belo and Bela check out the mansion while he checks out the area. Belo and Bela fight Golem who intimates that they must be Monstore's creations. In defeating Golem, the mansion burns down and Bem muses that they might have been born there, except that they were created to be good so it's probably not the case.

Commentary:

In the original plan for the series, Monstore WAS the scientist who created them and Golem was a detective who was always following The Monstrio looking to expose their monstrous origins (Incredible Hulk TV style). These characters have been repurposed for the updated version of the show, however in the comic that ran in Bokura magazine, one story does point to a Dr. Monstore as their creator. In this ep, it's interesting to see monstrous Bela speak "normally" because in monstrous form she presents as quite animalistic. Later iterations of the show sometimes feature

The Monstrio's creator and it's interesting that there's this idea of infusing a creature with a certain morality, making them inherently good or evil. Takes the free will question right out of the equation. Poor Faux Bela never had a chance to escape her situation, but doesn't have to take responsibility for evil either. Not full responsibility anyway.



11 恨みの鏡
Mirror of Hate
12/16/1968

Story:

Belo makes his way to a haunted house. An old man lives there with his daughter, but something strange is going on. The daughter has been locked away by her mom because she is so ugly and has to wear a mask to cover her monstrous features. When the daughter faints while looking in a huge mirror, her monstrous visage remains. It is angry and tells the old man how much she hates him and her mom for hiding her away. "Did you do it to protect me? Or yourself?" she asks. "I'll hate you til the day you die!" she says. When the evil face disappears, the daughter wakes up and puts the mask on and tries to take care of her distressed dad, but the face in the mirror tells her that she's lying to herself and that she actually hates her dad. She tries to break the mirror but it reforms.

Belo investigates the mirror and a ghostly hand pulls him inside. Bela also checks the mirror out and gets pulled inside after a brief struggle. Bem breaks the mirror, but it does no good. It immediately reforms. He yells the magic word Uganda!! and transforms and fights a battle against the mirror visage. She tells him how she hates monsters and that she is an expression of pure hate and anger. Bem tries to attack her, but Bem's attacks go right through her. She, however, is able to harm Bem. When the old man enters the room, she's distracted enough that Bem can impale her on his cane. The man rushes to her and

says that even though she is full of hate that she's still an aspect of the daughter he loves. Hearing this, she is somehow freed from her hate and turns into a mirror version of herself and breaks into a million pieces. The big mirror also breaks releasing Belo and Bela. The mirror visage dying also kills the good daughter. Bem thinks that the daughter had already died, but the soul full of hate was somehow keeping the body alive. Realizing that her father loved her regardless of her features broke the spell.

Commentary:

The constant reforming of the mirror is something like the idea in Monster Theory of how monsters always escape to plague society time and time again. The liminality and mutability of monsters makes them hard to completely destroy and as long as the unspoken fears and desires of society persist, they continue to return though perhaps in a different form. In this story we have a girl who is locked away because of her hideous features and felt unloved. Her mother may have been cruel to her, but her father loved her unconditionally. The split shows up in the mirror aspect, but also in her face which is half light and half dark. This split visage shows up a few times in the show, probably because the split itself is so uncannily creepy.



12 恐怖の黑影島
Horror of Black Shadow Island
12/23/1968

Story:

Three water ghouls (umi-bouzu) appear from the ocean and force a young mermaid to use her song to lure a ship to the reef so they can attack and drown the humans aboard. The mermaid is actually Nina, a human in a mermaid costume (but her song still is just as effective as a siren's song).

The ghouls want to make sure that mermaids are blamed for all such crashes. Anyway, a ship carrying the stowaway Monstrio heads into the ghouls' waters and everyone is mesmerized by Nina's song, though she hates having to sing for the murderous ghouls. Belo is captured by one of the crew, but manages to escape when the ship crashes into the reef. Only the captain and two others escape the water ghouls. While Belo befriends Nina and tries to release her from her imprisonment, Bela and then Bem dispatch the ghouls, though it isn't an easy fight. Nina is able to escape, but one of the crew members decides to kill her in revenge for his fallen shipmates and she falls off a cliff into the ocean. The shipmate is repentant after he learns the truth and is crying along with Belo just when Nina appears. She apparently is also a really good swimmer. One thing worth mentioning is that though Nina seems to be just a human in a mermaid costume, her song still has the power to mesmerize. This is a point that we're supposed to overlook once it's revealed that she's not a mermaid, I guess.

Commentary:

Nina's design is similar to a mermaid motif used in the 2011 live-action show, so I'm sure it's a direct reference. Also, the theme of doing good acts so that one can become human is a main theme of Hans Christian Andersen's and many other mermaid tales. The original story writer wrote puppet plays with strong moral messages and so it's no surprise that we get some deeper themes in this series. Also, just like how many Japanese comics with mermaid stories mix European and Japanese mermaid lore, this episode also brings in the umi-bouzu into the mermaid legend fold. This is one of the many occasions in which particularly Japanese monsters (like onibaba) are used as if they existed all over the world. Another intertextual connection is a girl being forced to wear a mermaid costume just like in TEZUKA Osamu manga Pipi-chan in which the girl Hyacinth is forced to wear a mermaid tail so that one fish can sell her as a slave to a dugong.



What isn't explained is how Nina's song has just as much power as that of the mythical sirens in Homer's The Odyssey.

13 ミイラの沼 Swamp of the Mummy 12/30/1968

Story:

Belo sees a group of mummified corpses leading a group of people including Anna, a little girl. The mummies are using people to dig up an ancient mummy king under orders from the mummy queen. Apparently, a good king and queen got possessed by evil (an actual demon or they just turned evil, it's not clear) and they were punished for being evil with an earthquake that buried their castle. Somehow, certain astrological conjunctions combined with moonlight brought the queen back and she's been digging up her servants every full moon. The king, however, can only be resurrected once every thousand years and so she's trying to make that happen.

Belo ends up getting captured when he tries to save Anna from the mummies' whips. When one captured man tries to escape, he's pulled underground to be devoured and his bones are spit out! Belo ends up finding the king and he is brought back to undead life.

Bela and Bem show up and Bem takes on the mummy knight, and Bela goes berserk on the lower-level mummies (whipping the whippers so to speak) while Belo gets the people to safety. After stabbing the knight with his cane, Bem next has to face the even more powerful king. He goes full "Uganda-!" And kicks the crown off the king's head thus disintegrating him. Bela is facing down the queen when the queen cuts off Bela's head!! Of course Bela laughs it off, puts her head back on her body and says, "My turn!" before beheading the beheader. She who beheads last, beheads best, I say!

In the end, The Monstrio swim away underwater leaving the humans behind now that they are safe. Belo tells Anna that he'll be right back but Bem tells Belo that he's not human yet, intimating that it's too early for Belo to make human friends. Anna believes that Belo will come back for her and so she waits on the shore as The Monstrio disappear into the depths. Poor Belo. Poor Anna.

Commentary:

From a horror perspective this one is quite good. It even is a bit gruesome with the man being turned to bones and all. I would've loved to have watched this show as a kid. We get to hear Bem's famous magic phrase UGANDA and Bela's condescending laugh. Oh how she looks down on evildoers. Belo has a compulsion to make friends. He can't seem to help it trying no matter how many times things

go wrong. The few times they go right seems to give him enough hope and that's part of the magic of this show. The fact that even such happy moments are tinged with tragedy make this an especially curious show. It's not likely that such a downer of a show could last even a full season on US tv back in the day.



14 怪奇の森
The Mysterious Forest
1/6/1969

Story:

Belo sees a brother playing with and taking care of his sister and wishes he had siblings (he kinda does). As he's walking along feeling sorry for himself, he picks up a book that a sick girl named Mari had dropped from the second floor. Mari seems to be in pain and thinks that she is being kept captive and that she is going to die. She asks Belo to go to a lake within a forest that doesn't seem to exist. There seems to be a connection to the book which shows a bell and a creepy forest. Though Bem knows there's no forest nearby, he gets a bad feeling and Bem's danger sense has yet to be wrong. He and Bela chase after Belo who has borrowed a horse which he has ridden to some creepy cliffs. On the other side of the cliffs is an even creepier forest where strange animals try to attack Belo who finds a body of water closer to a swamp that pulls him under. Luckily Bela's whip pulls him up in time. An evil-sounding voice (coming from an even more evil-looking tree with weird egg-like protrusions at its roots) seems to be angry at being disturbed and whips up a huge windstorm that carries Bela away. She uses her whip to keep from being taken too far away so the evil tree switches tactics and wraps her with vines. Bem fights with the tree stabbing it in the eye causing some nasty goo to come out. When he tries to retrieve his cane, he also gets wrapped up in vines. Things are looking bad as all three of the Monstrio are captured in the vines until

Bela finds the strength to whip Bem free. Bem transforms by saying his magic word UGANDA! Even so, the tree's vines are hard to beat until Bem throws his cane which hits the tree smackdab in the center. The tree disappears and a lake appears. At the bottom of the lake is a huge brass bell and when Belo frees a carp from the bell, Mari's book's pictures have changed to show the same carp swimming free. After Mari sees that all is well, the lake and forest all disappear. It seems that she had the power to create such illusions in her mind and needed someone to face the evil tree and free that carp in order for her to be well again. As Mari rests, the Monstrio walk off into the mist against a superimposed image of the fish swimming happily in a circle, which only exists in her delusion.

Commentary:

There's something new in this episode. Usually humans don't recognize the Monstrio's monstrosity until late in the story, but a farmer sees Bem and Bela and immediately pegs them as yokai. Something I noticed: Bela laughs a lot in this series, mostly at Belo's naivete or at her enemies who think they stand a chance against her. The enemies seem to be getting stronger as the series goes on, but the ways in which they are defeated is more often than not 'find the source of power and destroy it with a good cane stab'. I'm gonna call that cane Stabby because it deserves an appropriate name. The untapped power of the mind seems to come to the fore time and again in the series and is often the Id causing havoc when a person doesn't confront their true feelings.



15 狙われた目玉
The Eyeball Hunt
1/13/1969

Story:

A witch-goblin living underground in a

catacombs is consoling her granddaughter who is crying due to her lack of sight (and eyeballs, these two things just might be related...) and like all good grandmas, the old witch (who has only one eye herself) promises to go find her some nice emerald green eyes. The witch attacks a woman and checks her eye color with a magnifying glass. She lets the woman go as she has brown eyes. (I'm insulted.) The witch attacks another woman and finds that the woman's son has just the eye color she's looking for. Belo hears the mom screaming for help and tries to stop the witch, but the witch takes the boy and runs off. Bem finds the catacombs, but is unable to rescue the boy. Bem has him go back and cause a distraction until he and Bela can sneak in through another catacombs. They arrive just before the witch is going to bash in Belo's brains and the girl says, "Don't bash his head in! I want to play with it later!" Ah, what a sweet little girl. The girl and the witch seem to have some sort of special connection because they take on each others' forms and become one person at times. When Bem is proving hard to kill, the witch escapes to the surface where Bela is waiting. Bela has her wrapped in her whip, but the little girl bites the whip in two. Bem appears, UGANDA! and takes on the two. When he impales the witch on Stabby the Cane, she crumbles to dust and then the girl does as well. We learn that the girl was a psychic projection of the witch as she was lonely and isolated for hundreds of years. AhHA! That's why they keep fusioning! Giving the projection real eyes would have given the projection a separate life apparently.

Commentary:

In one scene, the witch looks right into the camera and says, "Give me your eyes!" and claws at the screen which creates a transition effect similar to that which is used in the opening. Some interesting play going on there and probably scared the pants off some kids. Later on, the image of the blind goblin girl sleeping on a pile of skulls is pretty freaky. The fact that the girl is on board with the eye stealing means that she's not exactly innocent. You almost feel sorry for her until she tells Belo that she will kill him. There's a second transition when Bem claws at the screen. I wonder why the sudden addition of this kind of creative editing. Except for the willingness of the two to kill others to get what they want, you kind of feel sorry for the witch and her projection. These ideas of projection and isolation seem to be a common theme in the show. You wonder if the monstrosity of the characters leads to isolation or if isolation leads to their monstrosity. Either way, I tend to be sympathetic even when the monsters are EEEEEVIL. I wonder if one eye would have been enough to make the girl real.



16 山荘の妖鬼

Demon Beasts of the Mountain Lodge
1/20/1969

Story:

Bela hears a scream while hiding under a mountain lodge. She rushes in to see a man with a knife in his back. Immediately other guests arrive and blame Bela for the murder. Bem arrives to tell her to play it cool, and that he will solve the murder, but is fingered as an accomplice by a strange woman who claims the murdered man is her brother. The police take Bem and Bela away. Belo notices and takes on the task of solving the mystery himself. Apparently the woman is a werewolf who is killing humans and feeding them to her wolf brethren. The wolves are angry because humans have moved into the area making it harder for the wolves to live. The woman is a wolf who ate so much human flesh she gained the power to turn into a human. Belo fights her as Bem and Bela convince the cops to check the woman out. When the police arrive at the lodge the woman escapes and plans to unleash the other wolves on all the humans, oh when she arrives the wolves have already been dispatched by Ben and Bela. Bela fights the wolf woman and "kills" her turning her back into wolf form.

Commentary:

I always love werewolf stories, but prefer when wolves aren't automatically portrayed as evil. At least in this case, there is more than revenge going on. The wolves' habitat and their survival is also at stake. Bem reasons that as the wolves have already consumed too much human flesh, it was dangerous to keep them alive, but it still seems tragic somehow. It's good that Bem and Bela trust Belo to solve the mystery, but it's not clear how the two got out of jail in time to slaughter all the wolves. Bela calls the woman a monster, which is interesting being a monster herself. I suppose she's referring to monstrous actions.



17 博物館の妖奇
The Mystery of the Museum
1/27/1969

Story:

Belo explores a museum where he meets young Ken who is playing with a scary mask he found in one of the exhibits. Ghostly apparitions haunt Belo, Ken, and the security guard until two robbers show up to rob the place. A female ghost brings exhibits to life that attack the robbers and then to attack Belo and his human companions. Little Ken is about to be guillotined, but Belo realizes that removing the mask from atop her coffin is what set the ghost free and puts it back where it belongs. At the very end Belo is telling Bem and Bela about his adventure, but Bela tells him it must be his imagination.

Commentary:

This is another ep where Belo is mostly alone. In fact, Bem and Bela don't even show up. Belo is obviously the point of entry for kids and is the real star of the show (which is why for years I thought that he was titular Bem). When Bela doesn't believe him, this opens up a gulf between him and the older characters and kids can easily empathize with the situation of not being understood or believed by adults. The ending song of the show also echoes this theme of adults versus kids, but this is the first time where Bem and Bela's maturity kind of separates them from their visibly younger companion. The ghost is probably the scooby-doobiest looking monster in the series so far. You can just imagine her mask being pulled off to reveal the real crook.

18 謎の彫刻家
The Mysterious Sculptor
2/3/1969

Story:

The Monstrio discover that an evil sculptor is making his sculptures from models' actual bodies when a piece falls off a sculpture revealing a bit of



hair. When Belo's friend of the week, the orphan Rumi, is hired to be a model by the crazy sculptor, the three come to save her before she gets "bronzed". Trying to kill Bela, the drunken murderer falls into his own vat of molten metal.

Commentary:

The sculptor is very insecure about his work even creating a sculpture of the critic who put down his work just to throw stuff at. He's also an alcoholic who loves to toss his almost empty bottles against the wall during his tantrums. At first you just think he's a misunderstood artist, but then you find out he's creatively bankrupt needing to cast actual people in bronze instead of sculpting even more beautiful figures. After the nutbag accidentally kills himself, Bela laments the waste of human life saying he was only a human on the outside. At the end, Bem let's Belo spend a little extra time with Rumi before they move on. Getting a bit soft are we, Bem? It's probably no coincidence that orphan's are treated like objects to be turned into things to be bought and sold.



19 古井戸の呪い
The Curse of the Old Well
2/10/1969

Story:

A funerary rite is being held. A boy and his

grandfather lay the boy's mom to rest by throwing a basket with her body down into the well. The bandaged grandfather says something to the effect of "If only they had never come!" "They" meaning the Monstrio. Then we flash back to Bem, Bela, and Belo looking for shelter. The grandpa says no, but the boy lets them sleep in the barn. Belo quickly makes friends with the boy who gives him a chicken foot(!) as a plaything. Bem realizes that the dead bodies scattered around the property are victims of a ghoul pretending to be the boy's mother. There's a fire and the grandfather is burned while saving the mother's corpse from the fire. Then we are brought back to the present. Bem tells everyone that the "dead" mother is actually a monster, which no one believes until it crawls from the well and attacks. Bem quickly dispatches the monster and they leave.

Commentary:

The flashback wasn't easy to follow at first, so I had to rewatch while paying closer attention. The bandages on the old man made it a bit easier to understand the chain of events. Not a lot to say about this one except that a chicken foot that moves its claws when you pull on a tendon is the creepiest gift ever! Luckily, Belo was just the kid to appreciate it. Come to think of it, the creative use of flashback in this series, though sometimes confusing is often used to heighten tension to good effect. I'm wondering how successful it was with younger kids, and how many parents had to explain what was going on (or in my family's case, how many kids had to explain to their parents).



20 鉄塔の鬼火
The Demon Fire of the Steel Tower
2/17/1969

Story:

A Mr. Harvard is being driven around by a low-ranking co-worker and they're talking about the Tokyo Tower-like structure he designed. The driver is killed by a disembodied hand and floating

balls of fire (onibi, demon fire) and a disembodied demon head terrorise Harvard as the car is guided to the tower in question and chased up to the top only to be unceremoniously dumped over the side by the demon head and hand. Soon after, in flashback, Bela follows a man who looks like he has something to hide. The man, who we later find out is the head of construction for the tower, apparently jumps in front of a train, but actually, the demon fire had pushed him. Bela trails the fire back to the tower and faces the demon at the top, but is overpowered and apparently drowned. Bem and Belo decide to look for Bela and Bem says "We three need to stick together when there's danger." Belo chases some demon fire to an office where a man is being threatened by the same demon. Belo is attacked, but Bem fights the demon off and we find out the demon fire is an onryo, an angry spirit that wants revenge against anyone who helped build the tower that was built over a graveyard. Even though several deaths occurred during construction due to vengeful spirits, they went on and built the tower anyway. Bem finally pierces the demon through the heart which actually pierces the skeleton of the thing causing it to dissolve and be at rest. Bela is rescued and complains that she wouldn't have been overpowered if she wasn't under water. Bem says that someday the tower will be famous and it's a good thing that people won't know how many people died to build it.

Commentary:

One of the creepiest scenes is during the flashback about initial construction when a construction worker realizes he's not alone in his crane. There's a woman crying and holding her head in her hands. When she looks up, she's smiling and half of her face is melted goo. It's a gruesomely effective scene. The episode seems to be a testament against capitalistic greed, but Bem seems happy to sweep several deaths under the carpet as long as a wonderful piece of architecture can be enjoyed.

21 怨みの髪の毛
Hair of Hate
2/24/1969

Story:

In the very first scene we see a noose being lowered. A group of female slaves is being driven by a cruel taskmaster in a craggy, desolate area overrun with vultures. The taskmaster in Nazi-like garb with obligatory monocle, shows the slaves the hanged woman and threatens anyone who gets out of line. They are here to slave away until they are executed or die from falling off the edge of a cliff. The taskmaster continues to kill slaves and then has wigs made from their hair. Apparently, wig hair is best if taken from someone



who has died less than an hour before. At the factory (where he is the only person?) he makes a purple wig (??) which he thinks will sell well. Even though the window is closed, a wind blows and a moan is heard. Then, Monocle Man is choked by an unseen force. The wig somehow makes it to a shop where an old woman sells it to a succession of customers who are visited by a moaning wind and then choked to death. The “spirit” of the wig likes to hide in wall art—a masquerade mask or painting until murder o’clock and then it strikes. One victim is the older sister of a girl who was playing with Belo. Luckily, she invited Belo, Bela, and Bem to stay over because they decide to figure out the secret of the wig. Bem takes the wig back to the wig shop and gives the old woman a hard time for using wigs made from murdered women’s hair. The old lady puts on the wig and speaks with the voice of the dead who say they will kill anyone who enjoys wearing such a wig. The wig then flies off into the sky to come back and kill the little sister who also tried it on. Belo and Bela fight it off while Bem rushes back to join the fight. Bem throws Stabby at the cane so game over, right? Nope! The wig has Bem and Belo on the ropes! But then Belo throws a birthday candle (it was the little sister’s birthday) at the wig and the fire does the trick. The two sisters are grateful and offer to let The Monstrio stay for as long as they like, but Bem says that they must keep moving.

Commentary:

This ep is an enigma wrapped in confusion put in a mystery blender on frappé and poured into a big bottle of WTF. Though the taskmaster is in full fascist regalia, there’s no clue as to why. Is he a rogue officer or military LARPer? Why does he need slaves? What are they actually doing? There’s no indication. Why did the one lady have purple hair? Who’s making the wigs? Why is the wig spirit killing women who just want a different look instead of men like the slaver. Actually, they might not be slaves, but prisoners. Then that guy is probably a guard and the “factory” is a prison. Then the guard needing an excuse to hang the woman before he

steals their hair makes more sense, as does the uniform. I think I should’ve listened more closely to what the uniformed guy called the women. Did he say prisoners? Can’t tell… Oh, well. That’s the way the purple wig moans I guess.



22 死者の門 The Gate of the Dead 3/3/1969

Story:

A full moon rises above the abandoned ruins of a town at the edge of a sunken lake. A boy is asking his mother, now a ghost, why she doesn’t come home. He won’t accept the fact that she’s dead and doesn’t seem to understand the concept of death. She’s being called to the afterlife and the boy wants to follow, but of course she forbids him to. A hag-like ghost chastises the woman for not dragging her son into the land of the dead and starts to beat her in punishment. The mother is then told to find other victims instead. The Monstrio arrive and Bem explains that the town has been destroyed in order to make way for a new town. Belo seems to be disturbed by the destruction and goes to check out a gate-like structure. Bem tells him that he senses something strange in the area. A man comes forth and The Monstrio hide. Bem thinks that the man has an aura of death about him, but Bela laughs it off. It looks like the man has been walking in a trance toward the gate. It is the ghost mother’s uncle. Her name is Jane and she is forced to bring the uncle to the land of the dead to protect the rest of her family, but then the hag tells her she has to bring her aunt as well. Bem hears the news that the man they saw was found dead in the old town and tells Belo that he has to go check it out. It has to be Belo because he’s small and will give whatever is attacking people a false sense of security. We then see the ghost mom in a trance and her aunt crosses over the gate threshold. The ghost awakens to realize that now her aunt is dead and there’s no one to take care of her little boy. That night, The Monstrio decide to stake out the

gate. They see the ghost mom's son walking in a trance and the ghost mom goes to him and holds him as he awakens. He says that he had to come as his aunt and uncle never came home. The ghost hag appears and tries to convince the mom that it would be better for the boy to just cross over since there's no one to look after him. Bela grabs the boy just before the mom tries to do exactly that. A ghostly wind rises and the mom gets an evil look on her face. Her and Bela face off and Bela is very angry. Bem wants Bela to let him handle it, but she's not having it. Bem lets her borrow Stabby instead. After she beats down Momma Ghost, we see that it was the hag controlling her. Bem stops Bela from crossing over to fight the hag and volunteers to go through the gate hoping that afterwards Bela can bring him back. Bem goes through and fights the ghost hag in his monster form. Bem "kills" the hag with Stabby (?) and then his soul returns to his body. Bela uses the power of the full moon and her shadow to bring Bem back to life. Ghost mom awakens and tells her son goodbye and that he has to be strong. The Death Gate is struck by lightning and destroyed now that the hag is gone. Bem finishes the ep saying that the boy will be fine and that the mom will always live in his heart.



riding through a craggy marsh. The sax blurts over their dialog making the scene quite unsettling. The wind blows snapping the skull branch and a creep in a devilish clown (poker deck joker-like) outfit appears from behind a small crag. The devil-man trips and his mask falls off revealing a regular dude who quickly puts the mask back on as some concerned folks look on from a castle entrance.. "You've finally arrived! This is the Devil's Valley! If you don't give me your souls, I'll, I'll m-m-murder you to d-d-death!" The camera pulls back and we see that we're watching a play rehearsal. The prince actor gives the devil actor a hard time for flubbing his lines and not being a scary devil. All the other actors laugh at the poor humiliated fool. The princess lights up a smoke and suggests the guy be replaced, but opening night is just one day away. All the other actors berate him as they leave him on stage alone suffering in silence under a single spotlight.

Commentary:

So not only is submerging towns underwater to make artificial lakes a thing that Japan shares in common with the US, a form of gentrification seems to have been a thing as well. We are once more presented with a sad orphan tale that gets even sadder as he loses his aunt and uncle and now probably has to become a ward of the state. The death gate and the way it feeds on the unfortunate and how the ghost mom is tricked into feeding the gate with her own flesh and blood just to spend some extra time with her kid speaks to the idea of "engines of consumption" and reminds me of a William S. Burroughs quote from Naked Lunch about power and addiction: "You see, control can never be a means to any practical end...It can never be a means to anything but more control...like junk." The hag really seemed to enjoy the fact that the ghost mom was sacrificing her own family to the gate instead of random strangers. Making the ghost mom complicit in the murder seemed to be the point. Those poor souls sold out by their powerless niece must have been quite tasty to whatever fed on them.

Belo follows the poor bastard and asks him about the play as he's never seen one before. When the actor complains about getting bullied, Belo contradicts him saying that the other actor's words were true and that he just wasn't scary. The guy really has a victim mentality as he blames the fact that he's never played a devil before on his incompetence and then he blames the other actor for forcing him to play a part he's not accustomed to. He offers his soul to learn how to be scary and then he tells Belo, who is worried about him, to just go away. Then he says he's going back to the theater to practice, practice, practice. He tries to improve, but isn't confident. Then an actual devil appears in the same exact costume the guy was wearing and says he'll tell him exactly what to do. Belo comes back to see how the guy is doing to see him talking to someone he can't see. A ghostly fire appears and Belo is attacked by falling lights and weights (all the old attempted murder on stage tropes). Several spotlights turn on Belo, blinding him and scaring him from the theater. He tells Bem and Bela about what happened and Bela is eager to explain away the occurrences as "good acting."

They decide to go watch the play the next night just in case. It is a packed house and Bem detects the presence of evil. Belo checks on the actor who seems in high spirits even though he

23 悪魔の化粧
The Devil's Cosmetics
3/10/1969

Story:

The story begins with a discordant wail on a sax and a skull impaled on a dead tree branch. What looks like a medieval prince and princess are

still is whining about showing up the actor that insulted him. The play starts and the guy gives a monologue as the devil character. The audience is thoroughly a-scairt. Belo is impressed and goes to take a closer look only to see the guy unconscious behind a curtain. Meanwhile, the devil chokes the prince actor on-stage until he falls to the ground as well. Other actors stop Belo from going to take on the devil, but Bem jumps in. The devil comments on Bem's monstrosity only for Bem to say that it's not how he looks, but his heart's lack of evil that counts. The devil knocks Bem into a devil desert dimension where the devil has the upper hand. Bem has trouble fighting an enemy he can't see and takes quite a bit of damage, but finds the devil's hiding place. He knows that the devil can read his mind and so he has to use that to his advantage somehow. He is able to surprise the devil and break its sword, but the devil removes an arm (!) and uses that instead. They are at a stalemate and then the devil morphs into Bela. Bem closes his eyes refusing to be tricked. It works and he defeats the devil returning to reality in time to see the curtain go down on the prince defeating the onstage "devil" to wild applause. The actors take their bows and the other actors complement his great performance. Bem reminds us that it's very easy for a devil to worm its way into your heart if you're not careful. Humans are weak, but we were born to fight such evil.



Story:

A man is trying to escape, but is quickly found by toga-wearing, stick-wielding dudes that look like stereotypical genies with ponytails but no other hair on their heads. They are beating the crap out of the man when Belo goes to investigate. The man is thrown off the side of a cliff, but Belo finds that the man somehow survived the fall. Bem and Bela look for Belo in a nearby town. The man is named Fuma and just has an injured leg. Fuma tells Belo about the evil priests with the sticks who kidnaped his father and took him to their secret temple. The priests are all blind and mute, but are fighting experts and led by an old man who looks kind but is apparently evil. Fuma tells about how he snuck inside the temple and was captured, but found his way out through a secret passage. Fuma asks Belo to help rescue his dad using a map and key he has. Meanwhile the blind priests face up against Bela, but the head priest apologizes for the attack and invites Bela and Bem to the temple to help them get back the map and key that Fuma stole.

The man then tells them about a town they visited where all the townspeople were weak and starving because some evil had been feeding off of them. The head priest and the warrior priests (who can see and speak at this point) investigate the source of the evil only to be blinded and made mute one by one. The head priest somehow vanquished the evil (which we aren't shown) and imprisoned him within the temple. He then focused on teaching his warrior priests how to fight without their sight because he knew that the evil being's son (Fuma) would come to try and rescue him. They killed the son, but he wasn't actually dead because he and his father are both vampires, the father being some 2000 years old. Bela doesn't trust the priests because they didn't show them the vampire father, but Bem thinks they are on the up and up. Meanwhile, Fuma leaves Belo at the entrance and sneaks in. He is confronted by Bela and Bem and calls for Belo's help. Belo trusts Fuma and tries to convince the others of his innocence,

Commentary:

The mix of medieval and modern is what takes the series out of normal time giving it a timelessness, but also a complete lack of time frame. This connects to the idea of folk horror and hauntology which uses such chronological instability to give stories an uncanniness. The premature scooby reveal cracked me up and then I see that it's all a play and I realized that I read way too much into what was going on. Still, the series does have some anachronical moments. Anyway, the devil actor's paranoia and his solution to depend on others (evil others) instead of hard work is sad, but perhaps a natural immediate reaction of being humiliated on stage. Belo's reality check maybe gave him a moment to reassess and realize that hard work really is the only way and even though he is getting pointers from an actual devil, he really does practice and try to improve. The fact that the man finds his confidence and finishes the play is a nice way to end this one. The curious thing is that there's no haunted make-up or anything like you might expect. It reminds me that the Japanese word keshou for make-up can also mean something like 'costume'.

24 人面の悪鬼
The Human-faced Demon
3/17/1969

but Bem has Bela call the priests. Fuma escapes while Belo stops Bem from going after him. Later, Fuma and Belo plan another rescue attempt while Bem and Bela are asked to stand guard outside the cell. [Let's take a commentary break]



Commentary:

21 minutes into the show and we still don't know who or what the father is. Both Belo and the more adult pair (don't forget that they are actually the same age though they don't act like it) think that it is the other that is being tricked. What do we know at this point? We know that the townspeople must've been attacked by something, and we also know that Fuma has been protective of Belo telling him to escape when the priests come. We don't know if the head priest is telling the truth, but we do know that his warrior priests are unnaturally good fighters. Our sympathies lie with Belo because as kids we knew what it was like for adults to rely on authoritative figures instead of listening to kids. Who is tricking who? The tension is killing me!

Was it a dream. He leaps up onto a tower pointing and saying, "It's there! At the northern edge of town!" He grips his head and falls from the tower. Above his unconscious form, the skeleton woman appears and appeals to Bem and Bela to help her and her people. Only The Monstrio can help as they are human/yokai hybrids. Belo awakens and tells Bem and Bela about his dreams and takes them to the place he saw there. Belo scares off a murder of crows to reveal the tram he saw in his dream. From a distance, a crow watches, but a horrible visage appears where the crow is intimating that the crow is possessed by some evil force. They investigate the tram to find a bunch of skulls severed from bodies now mummified and the axe that did the dastardly deed. The body of the woman of the dream is here too. As they leave, an older one-eyed woman warns them not to come close. She tells the three that whoever comes to that place will be cursed and sent to hell, and then she scampers off. The Monstrio are looking for the possible enemy when they come across a little girl looking for her "poor mother." The visage appears near the girl as she tries to board the tram, but several townsfolk (men in typical business suits, women in victorian dresses(?)) come to her and tell her that if she steps one foot on the tram she'll be turned into bones. Apparently all the townsfolk wish they could rescue their family's corpses and give them a proper burial.

Belo is tasked with following the girl. The old lady appears again and tells Bem and Bela that they are outsiders and shouldn't stick their noses where they aren't wanted. Bela thinks the old lady is the specter of evil that they've been seeing and makes to attack, but Bem stops her. The old lady says that if they really want to know what's happening, then they should follow her, but she warns them that such knowledge will result in them being cursed. Meanwhile, the townspeople have locked the little girl away to protect her from the curse. Belo comes to the girl's aid and she is surprised that he was able to get on the tram. The girl is ambivalent about Belo and so he has more trouble than usual making friends with her.

Back to the story:

Belo and Fuma arrive outside the cell. Bem and then Bela take on Fuma, but Belo gets in the way. Fuma throws his dagger and gets Bela in the chest. We then see Fuma change into a monstrous beast with one red eye. Belo was the one who was fooled and Bela has paid the price. Bem impales Fuma in the back and with his dying breath he throws the key into his father's cell saying, "Avenge me!" The father, also hideous looking, gathers up his son's body and tries to escape with Bem in pursuit. We hear, but do not see, Bem's fight with the father. Bem comes up worse for wear, but has defeated the vampire. He asks Belo to help him carry Bela who will need a half day to heal. Belo is glad that his foolishness has been forgiven.

Back to the commentary:

I really wanted Belo to be the one who was correct, but I guess the lesson is to not be so trusting. Saying that, there's no good reason for Bem to trust the priests over Fuma except that we should remember that Bem has his special evil-detecting sense. I guess this is another ep that highlights Belo's sweet naivete and how it can get someone killed...

25 ベロを呼ぶ幽霊
A Ghost Calls to Belo
3/24/1969

Story:

A wind blows through a modern (it has a tram), but derelict town and it calls Belo's name. We see a pile of human skeletons and a red-haired woman rises from the pile asking for help. She turns around and she is a skeleton as well. Belo awakens.

Back at the old woman's house, she makes a strange red concoction that gives off a pink smoke and begins to tell the story. It's as if we can see the past in the smoke. First, it was just one crow that came to the town, but soon there were hundreds. They would attack and kill people and no one who tried to escape was spared. One group of people got on the only tram the town had and tried to escape. The girl tried to join her mom on the tram but was stopped by the old woman. Then the crows attacked and killed them all. The old woman says that she was a fortune teller who thought she knew everything about the town, but has no idea why the crows came and why they are attacking people. The only thing she can do now is keep people from getting on the tram. She has no knowledge of the demon-like specter that haunts the girl and the town, as only The Monstrio can see it.

Belo offers to bury the girl's mom and they head to the tram and above them floats the specter. Bela realizes that Belo might do something just like that and they also head there. Belo and the girl get on the tram, but after she sees the skeletons, she faints. Belo goes to get her some water, but the crows have gathered. He tries to protect the girl, but he is unable to repel the crows' attacks. He calls for help, but just as the crows begin to gnaw on his wrists and ankles, he changes into monster mode. It doesn't do much good and Belo is thrown out of the tram. The girl's mummified mother throws herself over the girl to protect her. Outside, Bela is fighting the crows giving Belo the chance to grab the girl and escape, but the axe starts to follow them. It is held by the specter who says that he is the Crow Man who has come from the Eternal World to steal human souls. The axe comes down on Belo, but is blocked by Bem, who fights Crow Man to a standstill.

The Crow Man disappears and Bem follows him into the Eternal World to finish the fight. Bem fights an unseen force until we see that the Crow man has been defeated and his crows are all destroyed. The old lady realizes that the three are human-yokai hybrids and is grateful, but warns them to leave town. If the townsfolk realize what they are, they might blame them for the curse as they were never able to see the Crow Man. Belo complains that it's not fair, but Bela laughs it off saying it's their lot in life until they become human—to use their monstrous powers to fight the inhuman enemies of mankind. The old woman promises to tell the little girl when she wakes about how Belo (and her mom) fought hard to protect her.

Commentary:

So, there seems to be a pervasive anti-senior bias in this show, especially against older women. The fear of the power of knowledgeable women is something I first came across when I saw the 2-part TV special *The Dark Secret of Harvest*

Home from 1978, an adaptation of Thomas Tryon's *Harvest Home*. This is a New-England-set folk-horror where the town is secretly run by the women and men who try to go against them are mutilated or killed. Bette Davis was amazingly good as the matriarch and when the (spoiler alert) main character's wife and daughter fall right in line with Bette (in kinduva reverse *Stepford Wives*) choosing communal comfort over familial loyalty, and the husband is reduced to a voiceless, sightless, agentless entity I knew a new kind of fear. So when they split us up in school into the boys group and the girls group so that they could talk to the girls about menstruation and we were talked to about, I think, football or something? that fear resurfaced. "They're planning something!" my little paranoid pea-brain thought. Recently, I read the novel and rewatched the show and the husband is a guy who thinks he's a good guy, but he is also unconsciously leaning quite a bit into his patriarchal privilege. I've been that guy and part of me can never escape from being that guy, but I definitely look at "the old hag" trope with different eyes these days.

This episode works to do something similar. We are made to think that the old lady is possibly evil due to her one-eye and weird cackle, but she ends up being incredibly sweet, warning The Monstrio and promising to tell the girl about them. Even Bem and gang can rush to conclusions now and then so we shouldn't be too hard on ourselves. Being an outsider myself, I can tell you that merely crying about fairness and justice like Belo did at the end has rarely worked for me, but just being myself and letting people get to know me one-by-one (as Belo did through his actions) has done wonders in opening up people's eyes. There are those that can never see beyond the surface and words will



Bem versus Kitaro by patokon

do little to sway most, but there are plenty that look at deeds and make up their minds based on them. This show is wonderfully subversive in this, its initial incarnation, and I hope more people get to know it and its sympathetic monsters. Just one more episode to go and I'm almost sad to finish.



26 亡者の洞穴
Cave of the Dead
3/31/1969

Story:

Pleasant jazz riffs are heard as we see a town at night where three men are on their way home. Suddenly a monstrous woman appears and beckons them to come closer. She extends her open hand which sports an eyeball to one of the men and says, "I mean you!" The man instantly falls over and the woman grabs his body and disappears. The other men call the police but aren't believed. Meanwhile, The Monstrio attempt to move a huge boulder blocking the train tracks in front of a tunnel. They have no choice but to go full monster in order to move the rock before the train comes. They are successful in moving it in the nick of time, but are spotted by train security in their monstrous forms. Bela feels that something is not right and she and Bem go to check things out telling Belo to meet them at the clocktower. The security guys called a bunch of the townspeople who come and try to attack Belo thinking he's the one who put the boulder in place. Even though he is in his more humanistic form, they point to Belo's three fingers as proof that he is a monster. In the end, Belo is forced to transform to full monsterhood in order to escape.

With more reports of monsters, the police chief decides he has to check things out. Belo is waiting for Bem and Bela at the clocktower when he sees the monster woman go into a manhole. He follows her underground and then out to a mansion built on a swamp. The woman, who looks more human now meets her sister and tells her to grab Belo. She puts Belo's whole head in her mouth and he

falls unconscious. They throw him in the mansion where several townspeople have been captured including a young boy who is around the age that Belo looks. A moaning is heard and Belo is warned not to check it out, but he does and he finds a hole in the ground from which the moans are emanating. At the bottom of the hole, several ghoul-like people are undulating and ululating for mysterious purpose. Belo learns that they are soulless undead and that everyone captured will eventually share the same fate. One of the women comes for Belo and uses elongated arms to capture him. She brings him into a purple room and tells him to sit down. Belo is unable to disobey her orders, but the women feel they might have to use a stronger hypnosis on him. They want to use the people's souls to lengthen their lifespans. They start to feed on Belo's soul, but somehow it splits Belo into two bodies, humanoid and monsteroid.

Now that they know he's not human, they no longer want his soul and dump both bodies in the hole. Bem and Bela appear and they each hold one of Belo's bodies. Bem reveals to Bela that he's figured out how to become a human. They merely need to split off their soul into one of the soulless human bodies. First they need to free the townsfolk and then rescue Belo's soul. The boy who appeared earlier shows concern for Belo, and Bela muses that he would make a good host for Belo's soul. Bem tells her that to do so would mean killing the child. Their discussion is cut short by screams of the townsfolk. The monster sisters are planning to eat them all at once. Monstrous Bela faces off against them and they escape into the river. Bela and Bem give chase and Bem's head is almost eaten when he stabs the one sister with Stabby Stabbercane. Bela is having some trouble with the other one, but Bem throws Stabby at the second one. The souls of the people have been freed and they return to the once soulless bodies.

Bem frees these townspeople who are now back to normal. Bela wants to become human, but Bem reminds her of something important. If the three become human, then there won't be anyone who can protect mankind from all their supernatural enemies. As Bela agrees that Bem is right, the police chief shows up where they are with a cadre of cops. They set fire to the building thinking that it will finally quell all the rumors about yokai while Bela is able to combine Belo's two essences. There seems to be no escape and the three hold each other as the fire rages around them. When the building has completely burned down, the police chief finds scraps that were Bem's hat, Bela's dress, and Belo's shoe. The narration comes on. "The three have disappeared. Are they dead? Perhaps not. Souls of justice never die. Perhaps they are somewhere right now. If a mysterious incident happens near you but is suddenly made right, perhaps you have Bem, Bela, and Belo to thank."

Commentary:

The Monstrio is faced with the ultimate temptation. They have a whole hole full of soulless bodies that they could inhabit without hurting anyone, but by defeating the monsters, the choice becomes more difficult. Bela is so hungry to become human and to stop having to be judged for her monstrosity. Belo is desperate to make human friends. Bem doesn't seem to have any specific need related to being human, but you know that he wants the best for his family. However, he's not willing to sacrifice others for their happiness. It's a bittersweet ending (more bitter than sweet) and Bem's premise is perhaps flawed. He can never protect all of humanity and even as humans they could possibly do lots of good as they understand monsters and outsiders better than anyone.

This might now be one of my favorite anime of all time. Even though the plots are simplistic and flawed, there is a lot of potential to the characters and there are a lot of useful subversive elements throughout the series that connect to positive readings of monsters via Monster Theory.



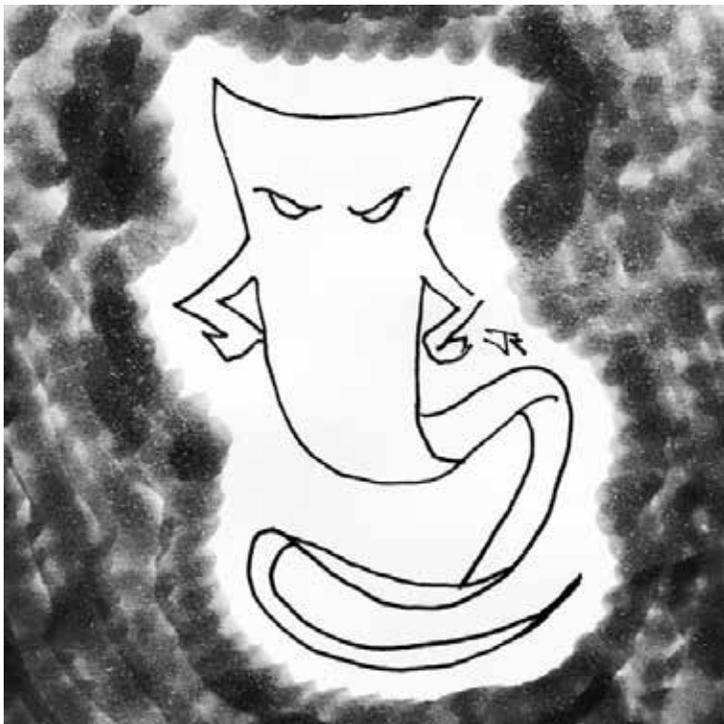
Kitsune-onna by Mai Ueda



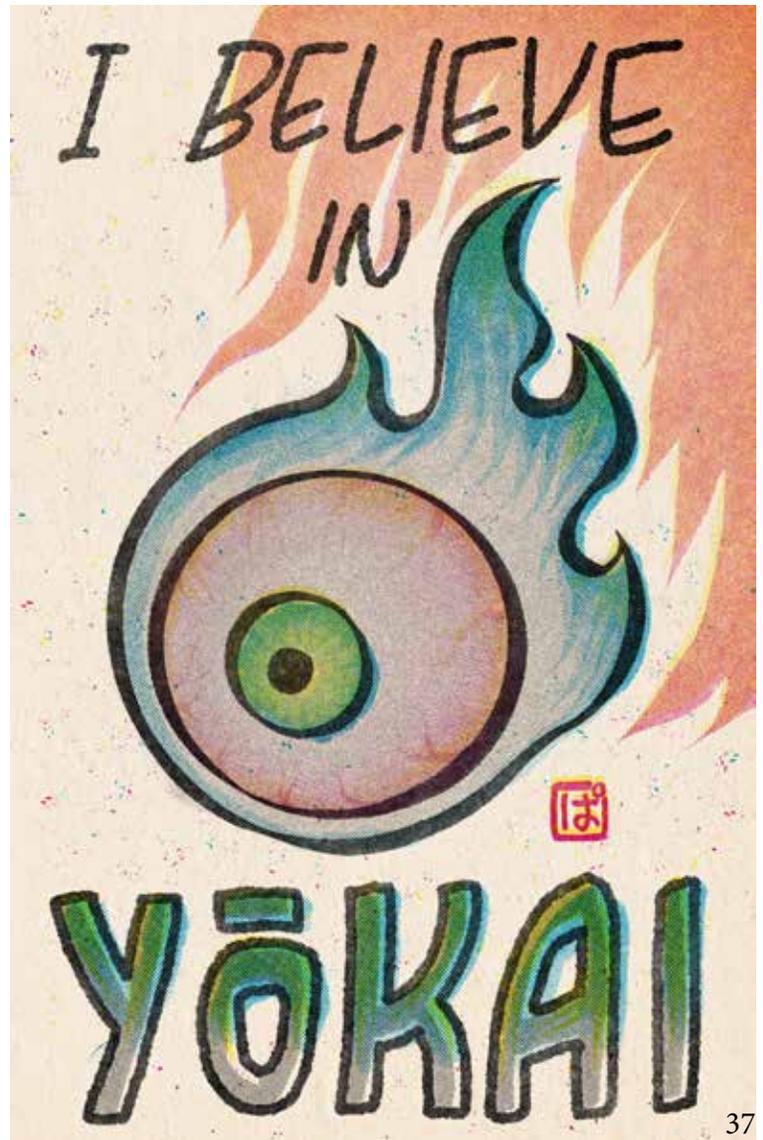
Magical Kimono Girl by Yushi Tabara



Nurikabe (invisible wall monster) by patokon



Ittan Momen (sheet yokai) by Jim Reddy



that these iconic ways of presenting poetic language and narrative visually are quite similar. While word balloons are a distant cousin of the Mesoamerican hieroglyphs, it would seem that that rise of the speech balloon was an inevitable and perhaps natural occurrence—at least insofar as the Americas were concerned.

Across the pond, however, in Europe, they went a different way. The Europeans were rather late to adopt the speech balloon practice. Historian Pascal Lefèvre states, “While the comic strip with balloons was almost immediately a commercial success in the USA, European artists were remarkably slow in adopting this so-called ‘American model’.” (Lefèvre, 2006, p. 1)



Figure SEQ Figure 1* ARABIC 3: A 1506 painting by Bernhard Strigel with banderole.

Lefèvre contends that the artistic novelty of the word balloon “did not seem to impress” the European artists who would continue using captions until the mid-20th century. (Lefèvre, 2006, p. 2) Instead of the ‘American’ word balloon, they opted to use captions (i.e., caption boxes). Caption boxes, like their dialog balloon counterparts, also have a historical basis for their usage in political cartoons and paintings as early as the 16th century.

In early paintings and political cartoons in Europe, they opted to use “speech scrolls” or lines of text connected via a long unraveling scroll (see figure 3). This tradition seems to have derived from the heraldic device of banderoles which began appearing in the 18th-century. Most banderoles hang beneath a coat of arms, or a small streamer (flag) carried on the lance of a knight, or beneath the crook of a bishop’s crosier.

Essentially, a banderole (also bannerol) is a term applied to banners that often commemorated a particular well-known exploit of a well-known person, such as a knight, bishop, or lord, either living or dead. The banderole typically flowed beneath the coat of arms. As such, banderoles depicted in political cartoons soon became a means to depict the written word and resembles the speech scrolls (or streamers) used during the medieval and Renaissance periods.



Figure SEQ Figure 1* ARABIC 4: Royal Coat of Arms United Kingdom retrieved from Wiki Commons

The tradition of using banderole styled text lasted well into the 20th century and beyond? But why did it take Europe so long to adopt what we

might agree is a natural progression of artistic style and innovation?

It was in part due to the war, and the fact that speech balloons, and American comics in general, were viewed as a kind of ‘Americanism’ to be rebelled against – especially by fascist countries such as Italy. Lefèvre explains further, elucidating:

While the fairly negative sentiments and opinions regarding comics were widespread in Europe, it was primarily the fascist regimes of Spain, Germany and Italy, resisting American cultural influences strongly, that took the most drastic steps (Martin, 1978:228, Giromini, 1996:128; Gori, 2002b). Under those dictatorships old style comics with captions again became dominant; the Italian fascist regime even ruled balloons out. (Lefèvre, 2006, p. 4)

Dauber’s own research also confirms this aversion and resistance to adopting word balloon usage. He observes that “This cultural invasion wasn’t always positively received.” (Dauber, 2022, p. 257) Interestingly, he highlights the fact that

Tarzan had been denounced in Europe for “Americanism” and “immorality” as far back as 1941. There were Werthamesque campaigns against crime and horror comics. And politicians and social critics in various countries viewed American comics as an imperialist effort to spread American ideology. (Dauber, 2022, p. 257)

In fact, both Lefèvre and Dauber each go on to explain that for the American comics that did get published in Europe, many were adapted into the European style and were edited to eliminate the word balloons and place captions beneath the pictures instead. Lefèvre observes the resistance to word balloons in the decades before the 1930s was primarily expressed by replacing balloons with captions. The other way was via gag-strips, or silent comics. He highlights the two strategies to replacing comics by reminding us that

Wordless comics can be seen as a way of evading the tricky choice between captions or balloons. It was also a practical way of dealing with international distribution in the multilingual context of Europe. The second strategy against the balloon consisted of adapting American comic strips to the European model: thus the balloons were erased and replaced by captions. Even European comics with speech balloons were sometimes adapted... (Lefèvre, 2006, p. 4)

This war of contrasting styles, the widespread aversion to speech balloons as innately “American,” and the desire to resist this presumed American artform seems to suggest that most historians would agree that the speech balloon (word balloon) is indeed and, perhaps, always has been an American invention.

Perhaps it wasn’t just the innate Americanism that bothered European publishers. It also might have been the fact that even back in the U.S., comics were frequently shunned by Sterling North and Fredric Wertham, among other conservative minded folks, as “juvenile pap.” Indeed, by 1954 Senator Estes Kefauver argued in a Senate Subcommittee Hearing into Juvenile Delinquency that comics contributed to both illiteracy as well as delinquency. This sentiment that comics were throw-away entertainment for young people continued well into the 30s. As Chris Gavalier points out, “When comic books emerged as a mass market medium in the late 1930s, they were considered the lowest form of literature, a juvenile sub-branch of pulp fiction, itself the lowest form of popular culture.” (Gavalier, 2016, p. 33)

Even so, it wasn’t long after the war that the artform slowly spread across all of Europe and was successfully adopted. And although this

traces the big historic events of the word balloon in comics, I feel such a general overview is necessary so that we may better appreciate not only the form but also the function of speech balloons.

PART 2: Form and Function of Speech Balloons

While you may at any time refer to the visual appendix which I've included for a visual reference of the various types of graphical text, or what I humorously refer to as bubble text, I feel that I should at least list the most common types used in modern comics.

The main three categories are obvious: Dialog Balloons, Captions, & Sound Effects.

What is less obvious are the sub-categories of each primary category of balloons. This is because while the main job of a speech balloon is to frame narrative text, there are times where the word balloon becomes a part of the art and is framing an emotional response or replicating a sound or a mood through style and typography. As such, this has led to various kinds of word balloons, captions, and SFX with their own unique styles and purposes. Some of the sub-categories would be:

SPEECH BALLOONS

1. Standard speech balloon with tail (anchored)
2. Speech balloon without tail (unanchored)
3. Thought balloons
4. Burst / Shout Balloons
5. Whisper Balloons
6. Wavy / Telepathic Balloons (Usually with Breath makers, whiskers, crow's feet)
7. Butting Edge Balloons (Anchoring to panel frame)
8. Breaking Border Balloons (Breaking out of panel border)
9. Double Outline Balloons (Adds dramatic emphasis)
10. Joined Balloons (Conjoined balloons that mash into one another)
11. Joined Balloons via Connectors (Balloons conjoined by a tail-bridge/connector)
12. Stylized Balloons (e.g., Rough Balloons, Jagged-shouting Balloons, etc.)
13. Electronic Balloons (Balloons with electronic speech, like that of a robot or radio)
14. Balloons with pop-out text (called 'outlining')
15. Squink Balloons (off-camera dialog mark = squink)
16. Music Balloons (include musical notes to denote singing or music)

Long time comic book veteran letterer Richard Starkings has said that "the responsibilities of the letterer have moved away from the precise, studious role of the calligrapher, to the flexible and far-reaching roll of graphic designer." (Starkings, 2003, p. 63) Given our overview of the anatomy of speech balloons, how could we presume otherwise?

Dialog, captions, and sound must all be carefully designed to not only fit the story but convey the feeling of the scene. As such, speech



Figure SEQ Figures 1*ARABIC 8: from Frank Miller's Sin City: The Hard Goodbye, 4th Ed.

balloons themselves become part of the art and so too part of the visual narrative.

Not only this, but as Hull said about Mayan hieroglyphics creating a larger, all-encompassing visual poetic language, comics also share a lot with poetry. The scholar Tamryn Bennett has argued that comics share more in common with poetry than prose, stating that

Comics, like poetry, concentrate on the aesthetic audio-visual arrangement of segments whereas other literary forms are more concerned with syntax than spatial composition. In addition to their concentration on formal qualities, comics and poetry both incorporate meter, juxtaposition, line breaks, enjambment, countermeasure and disjunctive strategies, amongst other typographic and aesthetic devices. In both comics and poetry, visual and verbal components can be repeated, layered, removed from panels or presented as a simultaneous series of moments not bound by linear grid lines or narrative 'closure' (McCloud 20). Akin to poetry, comics are formed by consistent use of visual and verbal segments and spaces. (Bennett, 2014, p. 108)

Personally, I think we can agree that comics are a complicated visual artform and share elements with both narrative prose and poetry. And while speech balloons, captions, and SFX aren't always absolutely necessary to be used at all times, especially in silent comics or silent scenes within larger narratives (see figure 8), I think we can agree with Bennett that they bring a specific and unique quality to the visual poetry of comics.

Conclusion

While comics may not have always utilized speech bubbles, they have always had a textual component to go along with the image or illustration. By developing the visual lexicon of comics and incorporating speech balloons, captions, and sound effects into the graphical text, comic book artists and letterers are able to create compelling visual narratives that go beyond simply telling a story. They are creating a much more involved and edifying experience. This is why, I feel, that anyone who shuns comics as an important literary and visual artform are truly missing out. When it comes to comics, it's not just about great storytelling, but it's also about great visual poetry. The experience of reading comics can have profound effects on you and elevate you to new levels of artistic appreciation – thanks, in no small part, to the visual lexicon of speech balloons and their graphical text counterparts.

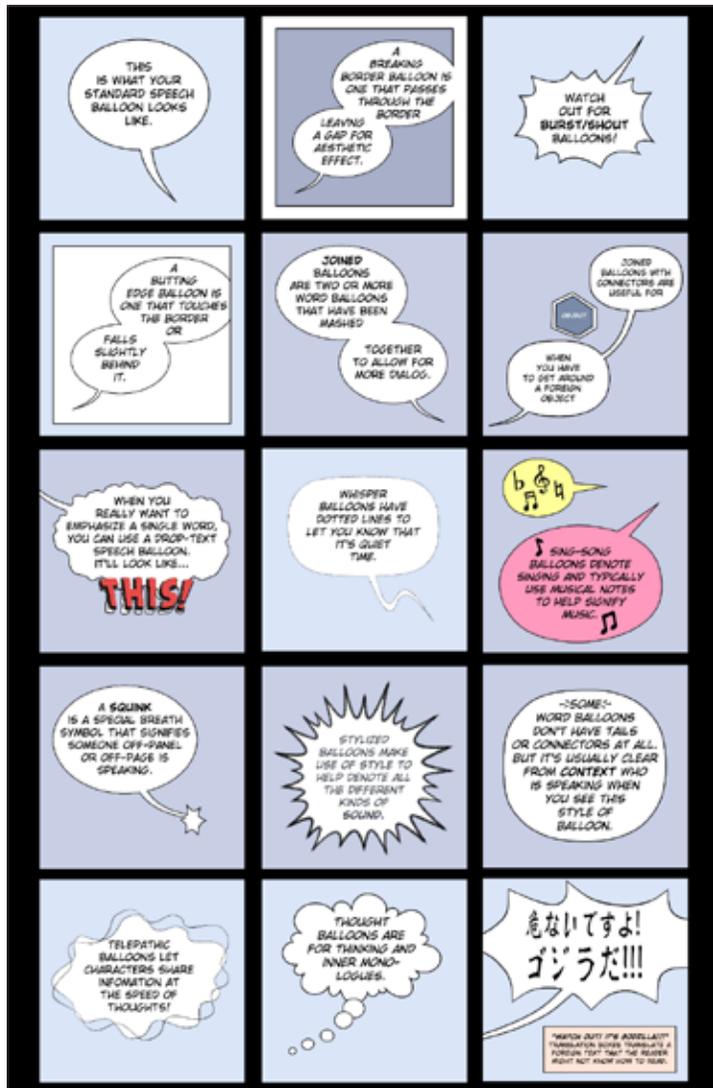
From Mayan codices to modern speech balloons, hopefully this overview of the word balloon will aid other researchers in learning about their form and function as well as open up further discussion about the role and relationship of bubble related text and image within the medium of comics.

Endnotes

1. Only four Mayan codices are known to have survived the Spanish incursion: 1) the Dresden Codex (or Codex Dresdensis), dating from approximately the 11th century (c. 1,100 CE), 2) the Madrid Codex (or Codex Tro-Cortesianus), believed to be a product of the late Mayan period c. 1,400 CE but surviving copies dating to around the 15th century, 3) the Paris Codex (or Codex Peresianus), probably slightly older than the Madrid Codex (c. 1,200 CE), and 4) the Grolier Codex, discovered in 1971 and dated to the 13th century (c. 1,300 CE).
2. Jeremy Dauber talks about the fascinating intersectional relationship between Jewish history and American comics in this fascinating interview: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D408dVEM-ME>
3. See Appendix 1 where I visually depict the main types of speech balloons, captions, and sound effects.
4. See: Raeside, Rob (4 April, 2022). "Banderole". Dictionary of heraldic terms.

5. Although the Senator's claims remain completely unfounded to this day, both Wertham's and Kefauver's crusade against all things indecent would lead to the creation of the Comics Code Authority in 1954, of which stated "In every instance good shall triumph over evil and the criminal punished for his misdeeds," and banned things like the depiction of drugs, alcohol, sex, and excessive violence – to be determined by a review committee. Today, the Comics Code Authority's overreaching and excessive form of censorship has been completely abandoned by every major comics publisher and is defunct.

Visual Appendix A



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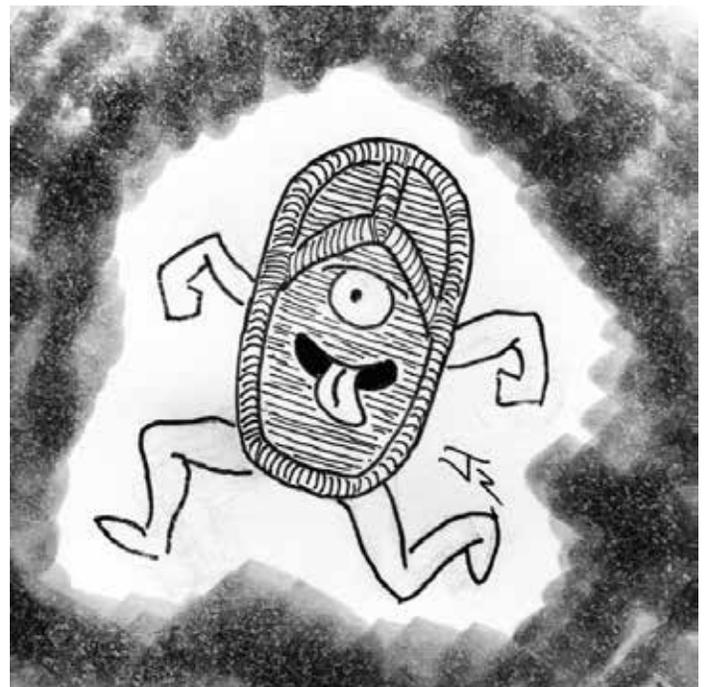
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His current series can be found on Kickstarter at: <http://bit.ly/3Nvv8Dg>



Sandal Yokai by Jim Reddy

OUTROID

We live in crazy times and crazy times always call for crazy monsters. I look forward to telling you all more about Japan's own particular brand of monsters, which while often unique provide the same functions they do for every culture anywhere in the world.

—PIW (patokon.com@gmail.com)



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