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# The Art Of Charlie Chan Hock Chye (Pantheon Graphic Novels)



## Synopsis

Meet Charlie Chan Hock Chye. Now in his early 70s, Chan has been making comics in his native Singapore since 1954, when he was a boy of 16. As he looks back on his career over five decades, we see his stories unfold before us in a dazzling array of art styles and forms, their development mirroring the evolution in the political and social landscape of his homeland and of the comic book medium itself. With *The Art of Charlie Chan Hock Chye* Sonny Liew has drawn together a myriad of genres to create a thoroughly ingenious and engaging work, where the line between truth and construct may sometimes be blurred, but where the story told is always enthralling, bringing us on a uniquely moving, funny, and thought-provoking journey through the life of an artist and the history of a nation.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

I literally could not put this book down. I devoured it, messily, poring through the pages, lifting up my glasses to peer closely with long-sighted age at the details, flipping back and forth, forward and back in time, chuckling at the quiet humour, marveling at the subtle and not-so-subtle homages to style and history, raising it to look at it this way, then that way, at the multifaceted piece of work it is, knowing that repeated readings would throw up even more layers. If you're a comic book reader, you feel this book as much as you read it, and you can see the heart and mind of the artist, fictional and real, laid - if not quite bare, then at least sufficiently ajar - before you. There is an aura here, the

sense of nostalgia, the yearning of a history that never was as well as the timeline that Chan lived through, and an ever-present yearning for things not done, paths not taken, goals never quite achieved, and a soft demand as to why things can't be this way. The current reaction to the book is revolving mainly around the brouhaha caused by the withdrawal of the NAC grant, but to concentrate on that misses the many other layers that this book has to offer. Make no mistake, this book does deal with the political history of Singapore, and political history can always be sensitive, especially when the orthodox narrative or viewpoint is challenged, even if in the most gentle of ways. But *The Art of Charlie Chan Hock Chye* is so, so much more. When I got to the part where Sonny presents the cover of "Ah Huat's Giant Robot" #1, I had a flashback to a conversation with Sonny at one of the first Singapore Toy Game and Comic Conventions, nearly a decade ago. He talked about the idea for an alternate history of Singapore comics dating back to the 1930s. We never had locally produced comics, but what if we had? What if we had local superhero comics published alongside ones from the United States and England? What would that have looked like? Looking at this volume, I realized that this was Sonny pulling the trigger on that idea, but taking it much further. This is an alternate history, but this is also what happened. This is a political book, but it is also about aspirations and the creative spirit. This is a book of tributes, but it is completely original. This is a personal book, but it is also about a particular culture, a particular society. This is Sonny Liew. This, not to put too fine a point on it, is *Art*. Kudos not just to Sonny, but to his editor, Joyce Sim, whose steady hand I sense just as much in this. To recap: *The Art of Charlie Chan Hock Chye* is structured like a tribute/biography/showcase of the career of the titular artist who has been drawing comic books since the 1950s and lived through the tumultuous decades surrounding Singapore's independence and up to the present day. The comics he draws evolve, reflecting the styles of the times, and move into political allegory as the stories reflect the events of those years. The conceit here, of course, is that Chan is a completely fictional character. He never existed, and neither did his comics. There was never an "Ah Huat's Giant Robot", or a "Dragon" weekly magazine, or "Roachman", but God, we wish there were. The comic book history he emulates is not your typical one - it would have been easy and too pat to suggest that Singapore would have had an American Golden Age style comic in the 1940s. Instead, Sonny has Chan's style being influenced by what comics were actually available to us in that period, from early Japanese manga in the Tezuka vein, to the *Beano*, *Eagle*, funny animal comics and only later going into Kurtzman's E.C. war comics and then the Marvel era and beyond. This is the kind of book that screams for annotations, quite apart from the pages of notes that Sonny provides at the end of the volume. The last but one comic showcased, "Days of August" is said by Chan to be inspired by Philip K. Dick's

"The Man in the High Castle" but the obvious homage to "The Dark Knight Returns" is not even commented on, for example. "Roachman" predates the Marvel Age by a few years but is definitely a riff not just on "Spider-Man" but the pulpish comics - English and non-English - of the late 50s and a narrative layout and colours reminiscent of Charlton. I could go on, but that would be too geeky and self-indulgent. I have to say though, that I would gladly pay for a full volume of the Pogo-inspired "Bukit Chapalang" strips. I can't say enough good things about it except to grab you by the lapels and demand that you read it and love it as much as I do. This book deserves to get several awards. I understand why the NAC doesn't want to get behind it, but sadly, it's really their loss. I would hold this book up for an Eisner as a sterling example of what the comic book medium is capable of. This is an ambitious work beyond what we would expect a Singaporean comic to be able to do, and Sonny just kicked its ass. You completely blew my mind, Sonny. I'm proud to know you.

Warning: Do not pick this book up if you wake up in the middle of the night, because you will not be able to put it down and go back to sleep, and its brilliance will haunt you until dawn. If you're not Singaporean, you'll gain lots of insight about what makes this strange country tick, as well as the darker bits that are usually swept under the carpet. If you're Singaporean, and have only heard the official Singapore Story until now, you'll learn so much. If you know a little about the alternative narratives that have shaped the country, you'll fill in some blanks. If you don't know anything about comics, you'll be surprised at the sheer range and depth of storytelling that's possible. If you know a bit of comics history, you'll get a kick out of all the homages along the way. If you're interested in design, this is a great example. If you're interested in densely-layered narratives, you'll love it. If you just want a simple story, there's one to be found too! Sonny Liew does a great job of guiding newbies along the way, so you won't be lost. If you're an artist, you may quite possibly be inspired by it. Bottom line, if you are human, and can read English, you'll probably like this book.

Amazingly complex and ambitious book with a ton of heart and soul. The author is critical of Singapore at times yes, but it's always well balanced and ultimately his love and affection for his country shines through. As someone who grew up in Singapore (and now lives in the USA) it really captures the conflicts that many Singaporeans (and expats who live in Singapore) feel about the little red dot. This must have taken years to research and put together and is a great read for anyone interested in Singapore as well as the history of comics.

This is the most unusual and thoroughly satisfying graphic novel I have read in years. Caution! No

superheroes. No confessional memoirs. No thinly disguised allegories. The fictional Charlie Chan Hock Chye presents his evolution as a creator of somewhat politically charged comics in the style (s) of a wonderful variety of artists. The book is a celebration of graphic art, an encapsulation of the recent history of Singapore, and a tribute to an artist.

This is an unusual graphic novel, entirely based on the history of Singapore since WW2. There are detailed descriptions (illustrations and text) of political figures. The plot consists of a retrospective of a Singapore cartoonist whose work commented on current events. Brush up on Singapore history when you read this, although there are notes in the back. Highly recommended.

A stunning and complex work designed as a work within a work. One learns the modern history of Singapore, the saga of a dreamer who lives to draw his comic books and a good bit of politics. I have given this to friends who love comics and to those who are interested in the history of South Asia.

Sonny Liew has achieved the feat of giving vivid life to a master of the comic book artform, Charlie Chan Hock Chye, whose own comic strips (extracts of which intersperse the main narrative thread), whether humorous, reflective or incisive, are shortform masterpieces in their own right. Liew has created a new classic of the graphic novel genre, at once captivatingly entertaining, historically enlightening and emotionally resonant. A welcome and fitting addition to Pantheon Graphic Novels' collection (Maus, Asterios Polyp...). Highly recommended!

A tremendous artistic achievement. Transcends the medium in the same vain as Maus. Stimulates the eye and the mind. I finished the book moved by it's narrative, it's message, it's immersing storytelling structure. Sonny Liew has officially arrived as a major force!

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