



Blue

Pat Grant

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Blue is the debut graphic novel of Australian cartoonist Pat Grant. It's a fascinating blend of autobiography and fiction with a sci-fi twist: in a seaside Australian town struggling with alien tentacle-creature immigration, a trio of aimless teenagers skip school to go surfing, chase rumors of a dead body, and avoid dealing with their own fears.

Blue Details

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Author : Pat Grant

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From Reader Review Blue for online ebook

Mark Schlatter says

Very underwhelmed. From the preview, I thought I was getting a mix of personal narrative and a slight science fictional take on immigration and racism. But the read was almost all personal narrative (with a strong surfer focus) and the larger issues just faded. Nice art, but I did not identify with the protagonist and felt like the plot dropped out.

Amanda says

Maybe it was the gore. Maybe it was the f-bomb dropped repeatedly. REPEATEDLY. Maybe it was how ALL the characters were so very unlikeable, downright disgusting, almost hideously repugnant.

sigh Try to find something of worth here: I read the afterword, and understand what/why the author wrote/illustrated what he did, sort of. This was a VERY... graphic graphic novel in some ways; yes, I GET the fact that he was trying to show the repressive circumstances he grew up in. But did he really constantly have to rub my face in it until I was raw and revolted from his work? Could some further creativity and discretion been used or did he just revel in the primal bestiality of it all?

Call me a prude, but I feel dirty after reading this; the stench of this will take some time to wash away.

Sam Quixote says

Pat Grant's Blue sees an Aussie man reminiscing on his adolescence – before THEY came. The aliens (a stand-in for immigrants) who took over the white population and brought their own culture with them – how this Aussie oik hates multi-culturalism and racial diversity! He also recounts the time he and his two friends “wagged” (skipped) school to go look at some poor bastard that got run over by a train. So it's basically Stephen King's The Body with a smattering of District 9.

That's not to say it's a derivative comic because Grant tells his story in an artful way. Blue's narration is a thoughtful means of discussing the immigration and race problems prevalent in Australian society and the economic decline of Australian industry. And while our narrator is a right-wing bigot, Grant never makes him seem less human for his beliefs and doesn't get polemical about how we should see him.

Except it's not a very deep examination of these complex issues. Grant presents us with these kids who're wary of immigrants and anyone different, we see the racism prevalent in white society, noting the contradictions that the whites were once immigrants to Oz, but what are we to make of it? Grant is really only pointing them out and, with his high level of subtlety, not leaving much of an impression on the reader. Xenophobia and racism are bad – agreed. And? The treatment feels very shallow and superficial.

The story is meandering, like a lot of slice-of-life stories, and isn't very compelling. Three kids skipping school to walk the train tracks and eventually stare at a dead body isn't that great a story even if that's not the point of the book, and it's doubly uninteresting for anyone who's read King's The Body or seen Stand By

Me.

The art style is very attractive – it's neat, imaginative and cartoony but realistic and expressive when it needs to be. It's very skilful and detailed and I enjoyed the use of only a few colours to give it its own look. The alien zaniness mixed in with the everyday reminded me of Kim Deitch's work with moments of Jim Woodring's kerazy style. The background presence of waves feels like an homage to Hokusai's celebrated 19th century woodcuts which I especially enjoyed being a fan of Hokusai.

Though Grant's able to weave in many layers to Blue, the effect is not very powerful. It portrays a declining side to Australian life well and maybe that's the point, but that doesn't make for a particularly interesting read. Blue is oftentimes quite boring and repetitive and I doubt it'll stay with me.

Clara says

The art is great, and there's a coming of age aspect that really gets me, always, but it's pretty weak at dealing with the racism/immigration subtext it sets up. The essay at the end is about surfing, and that makes sense!, but the lack of further exploration makes the blue creatures thread that much weaker. It's a shame.

Aj says

I really thought this book was really weird but kinda interesting at the same time. If you like a book that is really out there and defiantly SicFi/Fantasy well this is a book for you. It is about kids (but not just regular kids) skip school to go surfing and spot something.

Sean Williams says

A really terrific graphic novel, but I loved it particularly for the essay at the end.

World Literature Today says

"At ninety-six pages, its promise may exceed its reach, but the result is provocative enough to keep an eye on Grant as a creator with the potential for greatness." - Rob Vollmar, University of Science and Arts of Oklahoma

This book was reviewed in the January 2013 issue of *World Literature Today*. Read the full review by visiting our website: <http://bit.ly/VdaU0w>

Seth T. says

[My old home, my old home...]

Growing up at El Morro in Southern California, a point break that hit beautifully on a south swell, I had the pleasure of an easy intimacy with the ocean. Growing up the son of a hippie surfer-artist, who surfs even to this day, I had the pleasure of ready access to *Surfer Magazine*. And to *Surfing*—and I confess to not knowing the difference between the two. At least one of them had surf comics in them. I grew up seeing the work of Bob Penuelas and Rick Griffin (who pretty clearly inspired Penuelas). I, from my childhood environment, had everything I needed to appreciate Pat Grant's 21st century extrapolation of the surfer-art movements of the prior century.

But because Grant's *Blue* is much more than a exultation in wave-riding, I am fortunate that I've had other human experiences as well. Well, fortunate perhaps only in that I can relate to the experiential bones on which *Blue*'s narrative musculature is hinged. When I was a kid, there was a short tunnel that passed under PCH1 connecting my neighbourhood directly to the sand at El Morro Beach. It was sprayed entirely by talentless graffiti that focused largely around the concept of: CDM FAGS GO HOME. *CDM* referred to Corona Del Mar, the town a five-minute drive immediately to the north along PCH. Localism was fierce, as it is at probably every beach.² And *Blue*, more than even an exploration of Australian youth surf culture, is a pericope cut from the human society's natural antipathy toward the stranger.

In *Blue*, Pat Grant allows the grown-up version of a surf rat named Christian to narrate the changes that have taken place over the fifteen years since a new kind of foreigner began trickling onto Northern Australian shores. It's fascinating because Grant allows his protagonist to hold all manner of distasteful fears and opinions while simultaneously vindicating *some* of his protagonist's views. It's a delicate procedure, but I think it pays off. Greg Burgas was less sure and found Grant's unwillingness to condemn his lead's prejudices to make uncomfortable reading. I can see where Burgas is coming from, but I think that Grant's book gives the reader an opportunity to explore not just Christian's prejudices but their own as well.

In extended, almost book-length flashback (acknowledged to be like *Stand By Me* in several ways), Grant introduces the book's principal foreigners as blue-skinned, four-legged, alien-looking beings who propagate graffiti at alarming rates, have awkward fashion sense, and are careless with their littering. Between the time of their arrival and the setting of Christian's narration, the town of Bolton goes from a thriving town and 1989 Tidytown Winner to a broken down village entirely covered by graffiti and dominated by noodle shops, a favourite cultural food of the blue people (who are now the majority population).

And here's the trick Grant plays on readers. In Christian's view (and quite possibly from the view of Grant's readers), the shift from Tidytown to Graffititown is a deeply negative experience—and proof that unchecked immigration is Bad. Where *Blue* offers the reader the opportunity to self-examine is in considering the same world from the vantage of the blue people. Grant is careful to humanize the foreigners through cues rooted even within Christian's prejudiced narrative. We see the blue people's attempts at assimilation and the loneliness in an orphaned blue child. Grant gives the blue people a mortality that mirrors the mortality of the native white Australian (we see a description of a dead body visualized as a non-foreigner, but when it is discovered to be a foreigner, it looks the same but is coloured blue).

So then, the question: in the view of the blue people, is the town better or worse than it was fifteen years ago? Plausibly, the blue people would say it's better, more comfortable, and more in line with their cultural

tastes. So who then is to say that the Tidytown version of Bolton was the better iteration? Whose culture gets to play arbiter? Grant makes it clear that adding new individuals to a society will alter culture within that society³ and that those comfortable within a society are going to suffer some measure of change.

And in any case, the damage to the Tidytown facade is showing even before the mass immigration strikes. Each of Christian's friends and Christian himself are the opposite of tidy, living in personal squalor. Christian's house is a disaster and its walls cracked and failing. To remember Bolton as a paradise is to remember a lie.

That Grant gives us the tools to investigate one of *Blue*'s primary theses (that newcomers change community cultures in ways that may be perceived negatively) but doesn't tell us what to think was refreshing to me. In a way, it's fitting that Craig Thompson should have endorsed the book because I felt much the same with his *Habibi*, a complex work that doesn't outright condemn much but offers readers the opportunity to join a conversation. *Blue* has a lot of little things to say that pile up into maybe a large thing. The trick, then, is partially in unraveling what Grant himself is saying through his wonderful pictures, but probably more importantly unraveling what you may be saying to yourself in the midst of reading his work.

[This is actually a pretty cool page. The brown panel in the middle is meant to show the same spot on another day, when there were flawless sets and no chop.]

A Word on the Art

The above was actually going to be the conclusion of my review but I found it offensive that I hadn't yet mentioned Grant's superb art. His environmental sense is incredible and he uses his pages' paneling to lay out his story in inventive, evocative ways. His treatment of the natural world is lush, wild, and important—even as he shows the foreignness of the blue people within Bolton's society, he makes the Australian seem even more the foreigner when dwarfed by the wildness of the forest or the tumult of the sea. Grant's lines are thick and powerful and his work owes a clear debt to Rick Griffin (a debt he acknowledges in a wonderful afterward, playing with the history of surf comics and especially Australian surf comics). His palette consists of black-and-white, spare shades of brown, and spare shades of blue—and he doesn't need anything else. He uses these to virtuosically play his themes (locals and tourists) off each other. It really works.

Notes

1. PCH stands for Pacific Coast Highway, aka the 1 or Highway 1, a length of road that runs nearly the length of the California coast.
2. "Localism was fierce, as it is at probably every beach."

As every surf break only allows a limited number of waves per hour and only a small fraction of those are set waves, competition for those waves can be tough. With locals, an uneasy hierarchy might form so that the top dogs get the best waves and leave the scraps for those lower on the totem pole. In more egalitarian surf societies, a first-come-first-served lineup will form, granting access to waves on a first-come-first-served basis. In either case, waves are a limited commodity and if additional bodies are jockeying for rides, those local to the break are going to be getting fewer rides than they would otherwise. Hence a traditional and culturally institutionalized animosity toward visitors, tourists, non-locals.

3. "Grant makes it clear that adding new individuals to a society will alter culture within that society."

It's a facile point but one worth making since in trying to be welcoming to newcomers, we often gloss over the changes they will necessarily bring with them. It may be that our fear of causing offense or being seen as bigoted may cause us to pretend that stimulus to a system won't affect the system.

[Review courtesy of Good Ok Bad]

Ben Buchanan says

An entertaining look at coastal Australia through the eyes of a typical, deadshit, surf rat. The parallel between surf town localism and nationwide xenophobia was a nice starting point. The classic beach punk juxtaposition of Christian's Dead Kennedys cigarette lighter and a "We grew here you flew here" sticker highlights the disconnect between the free spirited, counter cultural past of surfing compared to what Robert Drewe called the "careless, violent hedonism" of modern beach culture. Ignorance and hatred run deep in these idyllic coastal communities and the surf line up is often where physical conflict erupts.

I picked this up at a library as I liked the look of the artwork and was pleasantly surprised to find it was Australian, and, according to the essay at the end, self-consciously so. I identified with Grant's "latecomer" attitude to comics and his characters' crude feelings of antipathy towards the American comic book universe. As Grant says of Australian culture in his essay, "Our way of writing history is to destroy old things pertinent to our landscape and experience, and to import readymade mythologies from overseas." He goes on to shed light on the mainly ignored history of Australian surf comics.

Anyone who has spent time in an Australian beach town will relate to this book. The characters aren't meant to be likeable. Grant has obviously been inspired by the working class struggle of your Cronellas and Maroubreas. I'd love to see him take a stab at Byron Bay or Noosa!

Deja says

ive been on a graphic novel kick. i wanted to love this book. i even wanted to like it. But i can't. i know it tries to make a statement about economic decline.. immigration and racism..how people and communities have a hard time dealing with immigrants... but in the end it feels not so much like fluff but barely scaped surface of.. hey.. maybe we shouldn't hate people who look different to us and change things... you can come away from this book thinking both ways. we need be colorblind yet this perpetuates the idea that immigrants (that read as asian) can destory your perfect white suburbanville where people care about their lawns and make everything be icky asian food and grafitti filled urban ghettos. i wish author would have included at least some acknowledgement of aboriginal/colonial issues or some protagonist other than the ooo dealing with icky aliens is harddd type sentiment. this left a bad taste. too bad. its excellent artwork and can tell a talented story teller. just did not go far enough.

Harry Chen says

The book was a pretty enjoyable read albeit a short one. It took longer to read his essay about the graphic novel at the end than the actual story itself. Even so, I enjoyed the Australian slang and although the language was quite explicit, I could relate to it a bit more because I am a teenager living in Australia. The overall plot of the story is about an old man describing an experience he had when he was younger in which he and two other friends ditched school to surf. However, after hearing from another friend that the corpse of someone who had recently been ran over by a train could still be seen on the tracks, the friends then decide to follow the tracks to find the dead body. The main prevalent theme of the story was definitely racism and this can be seen through the main character's perspective on the 'aliens' that went to the town and essentially took over the town. The aliens are most likely referring to Asian immigrants and the fictional town 'Bolton' definitely reminds me of Springvale and its large demographic of Asian people that live there. The perspective of the main character is, to be frank, racist and sees the import of the aliens' culture as an invasion to his own Australian culture. The book is geared to make you biased against the 'aliens' but also subtly shows that the 'aliens' are just like any other people that aren't completely different to the natives living in Bolton. An example of this is the dead corpse on the train tracks. The book describes the person in a way that makes you think of the corpse as an Australian but in the end it is revealed that the corpse is blue and the tracks are covered in blue. It shows that even though a Bolton native and an 'alien' may have had the same circumstance, your perspective on the situation is entirely different between the two. I really liked the artwork and its 'organic feel' in that it was completely hand written and drawn with a pen. The authors essay at the end also shows how enthusiastic he is about graphic novels and also novels that included surfing in it. Overall I liked reading the book but the plot wasn't deep enough and the book also gave off the impression that it was racist even though the author may not have wanted to be that way.

Dimitris says

Ah.. this was... weird.. and not in a good way.

It was short and not interesting.

Started nice enough but then it all went downhill from there.

It's a biography?! and mostly about newcomers and immigration in some way. About kids being hateful for no reason just because someone is different and/or a person is not from the same place. The story is non-existent and mediocre at best.

The artwork is really nice and what really got me to buy this. The colouring also. Really good. Just wish it had more to give.

Sooraya Evans says

That opening scene made me sad. Kids sure can be cruel sometime.

Overall, this was a forgettable look into immigration and racism in Australia.

Mark says

"Surfing with the Aliens: Pat Grant's Blue"

[A version of this review ran in German in the Swiss comics journal STRAPAZIN.]

If Pat Grant had conceived BLUE as a Hollywood movie rather than a graphic novel, his agent's pitch might have sounded something like this: "Imagine STAND BY ME meets DISTRICT 9 set in a small Australian surf town." I'm not sure how many film studios would have bit on that premise, but in Grant's deft hands the concept works out brilliantly as a comic.

The narrator of BLUE is a happy-go-lucky but not entirely likable "bogun" or Australian redneck. By means of a subtle and slippery series of flashbacks, he relates his childhood in the fictional seaside town of Bolton, back in "the good old days" (they always were) when life was carefree, the action was on the corner or at the local drugstore, and the cool kids "wagged" school to surf whenever the big waves rolled in. Two critical moments in time define his story. The first is a distinct, sharp-focus memory of a day when he and his friends set out to find a body that had been run over on the railroad tracks outside town. The second is the broader but blurry passage of years as "the good old days" were ruined by a group of immigrants moving into town: people not like us, people who don't "get" our way of life, aliens.

In BLUE, the aliens really are ALIENS: goofy-looking multi-legged newcomers who eat strange noodles, scribble hieroglyphic graffiti, and don't stand a chance of integrating with the locals. BLUE never makes a big deal about these aliens: where they came from, who they are, or the fact that they're not even human. Indeed, Grant barely gives the aliens any "screen time" at all, and that's part of what makes the story so effective. While BLUE is visually vibrant and seductive (with stylistic cues from Jim Woodring, Dave Cooper, Roger Langridge, and even Japanese woodblock prints), as a narrative it is an extremely subtle work, dealing obliquely with themes of adolescence, social change, class, race, and (especially) memory and regret. Grant manages to address complex problems of immigration and xenophobia while also somehow not diminishing or devaluing the worldview of his somewhat racist narrator.

BLUE is a thoughtful book by a thoughtful writer and artist, and it avoids many of the failings of the typical "first novel." Grant addresses difficult sociological issues with a light touch; he avoids polemic, and as a result his "cartoony" book leaves the reader thinking about some of these important issues days or weeks later. Even the book's title is ambiguous: does "Blue" refer to the skin of the aliens; the color of the surfers' waves; or the mood of the narrator as he thinks back on his life?

Grant's thoughtfulness is further highlighted in the smart essay at the end of the book, a revisionist history of Anglo-American comics from the point of view of a Gen Y surfer kid growing up on the other side of the globe. He also has some unconventional ideas about copyright, and explains in the indicia why he has made BLUE available to be read for free on his website. And read it you should, but Top Shelf has done such an incredible job on the book's design and production, you owe it to yourself to get the paper version.

Ian Roditi says

¿Recuerdas ese día?

Ese día en el que te escapaste de la escuela con tus amigos, ese día en el que todo era mejor y te quejabas de que las cosas no fueran mejor, ese día cuando las cosas eran diferentes y no podías evitar echarle un ojo a la catástrofe.

De eso trata esto, de ese día.
