



Tonoharu: Part One

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Daniel Wells begins a new life as an assistant junior high school teacher in the rural Japanese village of Tonoharu. Isolated from those around him by cultural and language barriers, he leads a monastic existence, peppered only by his inept pursuit of the company of a fellow American who lives a couple towns over. But contrary to appearances, Dan isn't the only foreigner to call Tonoharu home. Across town, a group of wealthy European eccentrics are boarding in a one-time Buddhist temple, for reasons that remain obscure to their gossiping neighbors ...

Top Shelf is proud to distribute the Xeric Award-winning graphic novel from Lars Martinson!

Tonoharu: Part One Details

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From Reader Review Tonoharu: Part One for online ebook

Heather Clitheroe says

Startlingly good - the art is lovely, and the level of detail in the drawings is exquisite. The story is lovely, though at times, Daniel Wells' awkwardness and shy nature made me want to squirm in sympathetic embarrassment. The sign of a well-written story, I think.

Sarah says

This is the story of an American teaching English in Japan. While the sense of disconnection and uncertainty is understandable, the book seems to be not about the disorientation of living in a foreign country, but about the character's own apathy and inability to connect with anyone. The story moves very slowly and very little actually happens. For someone who was willing to take the step of moving to another country alone, Dan is surprisingly unwilling to make any effort to interact with people, try new things, or even learn the language so he can work better with his colleagues and students. It takes a lot of effort to move to such a different place and not have interesting experiences and meet interesting people, but this character has the perfect mix of laziness and ineffectiveness to pull it off. There was a glimmer of hope near the end that he might start opening up and that the people he meets would help him live this experience better, but it was not to be.

It would probably have been better to combine this with the upcoming second volume so that there would be some sort of closure or feeling that the characters had changed or learned something. At least, I hope that something actually happens in the next book. I will brave vol. 2, but if it only involves endless panels of Dan standing around looking unsure of himself, I will be very disappointed.

Lydia says

Uh. Well, this was a disappointment.

I picked up this book for the cover and was so interested to see such a sparse work. Martinson writes the panels with little speech and sometimes the narrator's words above the panel, but other than that there's little text.

I really enjoyed the muted three-tone colour palette and the line art, that was beautiful.

... but I was just disappointed. Looking at the blurb, I thought it would be a firm favourite. I love melancholy, slow-moving Japanese books, particularly the ones set in obscure little towns in the countryside.

But Dan Wells is fucking irritating. As an Australian expat to Canada I can tell you getting acclimatised to a new environment takes time and energy, and you won't always feel like you were rewarded for your time or your efforts, but you'll get there.

I understand homesickness but I was frustrated by the lack of energy Dan had. I feel like he was supposed to be written as a depressed character, and depressed characters are logistically difficult to write because depression is often defined by a sameness, a slow spiral into nothing.

This could've been so much more, so much better and I think that's what frustrated me the most. I would hope the other volumes would be more interesting, but to be honest, I'm not really curious to find out what happens to Dan Wells.

2 stars, one star for the writing, one star for the art.

Steve says

The framework of this story is such that it begins with the main character leaving his job as an assistant English teacher in Japan and moving back home. Then we are instantly thrown into a flashback in which we start with his first day on the job. It's an interesting way of getting the readers involved in the story, because we want to see how things progressed to the point where they ended up. Tonoharu then is a book that makes you want more, and I cannot wait for the next installment.

Jim Angstadt says

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It's hard to be interested in a book where the primary character is not even a little bit interesting. The guy is clueless and boring. The tempo was too slow. The graphics are a solid OK.

Holly Thompson says

Loved the drawings and concept but wanted more story and more tension.

Ashley says

Absolutely incredible! The art is sublime and mesmerizing, but what impressed me most is how it really encapsulates the experiences I had as an English teacher in Japan. At times I was aching with nostalgia from the too-familiar scenery; at other times I just wanted to reach through the pages and tell Dan, "me too!"

So, so good, for those who have taught in Japan, those who are dreaming of doing so, or those who want to see a glimpse of Japanese life beyond the shiny, high tech Tokyo fantasies.

Peter Derk says

This really isn't a bad book. It just suffers from the fact that the main character is so painfully awkward. It's hard to read because you keep thinking, "Jesus, pull it together 5%. And stop being in love with a girl you met for four minutes who is obviously not interested in you."

I'm a big fan of books where the main character is unlikable. A jerk or an idiot or even painfully shy. But painfully shy is hard. As a reader, it's hard to feel compelled to keep reading when you're sort of yelling crappy high school football coach encouragements at the main character in your head.

Come on!

Pick it up!

Let's go!

I guess the character was so shy and weird, it's like that shy, weird friend you have who you feel bad for, but holy shit is that guy NOT a good time. You want to hang out with him, sort of, but when you are thinking something might be super fun, the last thing you do is invite the guy because you don't want him to expose the ways it's possible to have an awful time in what seems like a total blast.

Chad Jordahl says

I often felt frustrated that the milquetoast main character didn't engage more. And yet his diffidence and blandness feel real. The art is impressive and a pleasure to look at. I look forward to the second volume.

Gabrielle says

Good enough but I won't be seeking out part two. The unfortunate thing for this graphic novel is that my friend wrote a short story on basically the same thing and I loved that so much and it was so insightful and funny that this seems a bit dull in comparison. Nice illustrations though.

Philip says

This is part one of four about a man who goes to Japan to teach English.

He's not really sympathetic at all. He's not very interesting, and his interests are limited. (The students ask him questions during his introductory lesson. He didn't come up with any hobbies, and when pressed by another westerner, the only things he could come up with were 'sleeping and watching tv.')

He doesn't seem to appreciate the culture around him.

I could give him advice - get a tutor, branch out and meet people, don't hang out solely with people who know English, walk around on your own instead of hanging out at your lame apartment - of course you're bored.

Instead, I'll ask him a question: Why did you go there in the first place?

It was a decent enough read to make me want to pick up the next couple books. And it was fast. I'm wondering if he'll end up taking any of the advice I wasn't going to give him, or if he'll end up leaving sad, dejected and feeling like a loser.

Kate says

Part one of a planned four part plus series. The illustrations are great, especially the lovely cover, endpapers and wonderfully detailed title page.

Tonoharu starts with a first-person account of an Assistant English Teacher, or AET, at a middle school in Japan mulling over whether to renew his contract for another school year. He reviews some of his experiences over the previous 8 months, wonders a bit about the AET who taught before him, and doesn't come to a decision.

The story continues as an imagining of the experiences of the previous teacher, who turns out to be kind of a schlub who is grossly underqualified for his job and barely interested in the world around him. The character is intensely boring and not very fun to read about, even with pictures. I pressed on, hoping for some transformation or resolution. Sadly, *Tonoharu* comprises only the first act for each of these characters and fails to make me clamor to find out what happens next.

Abby says

This is a pretty little graphic novel based on the author's experiences teaching English in a small Japanese village. At times it got a little too "Lost In Translation" for me (those cold exotic Japanese people make me feel sooooo alienated and melancholy. Boo fucking hoo, at least TRY to learn some Japanese before you go live in Japan for a year, whitey!), but the illustration style is nice. Grey-green sepia tones and lots of shading lines. Pretty.

Bill says

Definitely feels like part one of a larger story -- we barely get to know the main character, the setting, and the supporting cast in this short volume, but I'm intrigued to read more. I like how well "culture shock" is portrayed in this story, with our young protagonist experiencing everything from confusion to boredom to joy at his experiences in a small Japanese town. The main character's moping and time-wasting is frustrating to read about, but it fits his personality and concept: a young man who sought out a life-changing opportunity (teaching English in Japan), but doesn't quite know what to do with it. Thankfully, I picked up book two and book three at the library along with this one, and I'm looking forward to reading them soon.

Bookalicious says

I'm quite baffled at all the negative reviews about *Tonoharu*. For those of you internally screaming at him to make different choices—the bad social decisions are quintessential to Daniel's character. Yes, he is painfully awkward and equally clueless on how to better his situation. And that's what makes this story interesting. I for one really enjoyed seeing life through the lens of a socially inept character.

There is a fair portion of dialogue written in Japanese characters. I thought this was a clever device to help

put the reader in Daniel's shoes. Unless you can read Japanese text, you feel just as disparate.

The artwork is simple yet strong. You can tell Martinson has been honing his craft for some time.

I can't wait to read the remaining volumes in this series. As in I'm about to go get them right after I'm finished typing this review.
