

Greg Lockard, Tim Fish, Hector Barros, and Lucas Gattoni. *Liebestrasse*. New York: Dark Horse Books, 2022. Pp. 119. \$19.99

With recent book bans targeting accessible literature, history, and LGBTQ+ stories, it is encouraging to find a narrative that speaks to the importance of all three categories. Monographs over the past several decades have highlighted the importance of non-heteronormative archives for telling stories about the past, and secondary and post-secondary educators have continued to demonstrate the crucial role of those stories in their classes. There are, however, additional opportunities to expand the accessibility of these texts beyond traditional readings, like monographs, and create an even more diverse body of literature within the classroom. *Liebestrasse* provides one such opportunity by telling twentieth-century queer history through an innovative and accessible media form: a historically based graphic novel.

Written by Greg Lockard and designed by Tim Fish, Hector Barros, and Lucas Gattoni, *Liebestrasse* follows the lives of a fictional couple as they navigate queer romance in 1930s Berlin. Sam Wells, a traveling American, recounts the story of meeting his former partner, a German man named Philip Adler, while in Berlin on an extended business trip. The graphic novel follows Sam's memories of their life together, with their romance unfolding against the backdrop of the slow-building horrors within Nazi Germany. The couple share intimate moments and experience the support of a shared community, with Philip arguing all the while that it should not be a crime for either of them to express their affection publicly. The sentiment, one that echoes throughout queer histories and fictional accounts alike, unsettles Sam, who remains nervous about the growing unrest in the nation. Despite their ideological differences on the social place of queer romance, the couple remain together—up until Philip's arrest and implicit murder by the Nazi secret police. Though it is unclear if Philip perishes as a victim in a death camp or is executed prior, his death is intrinsically linked to concepts of political dissent and sexual "deviance." Viewed as a "pervert" himself in the eyes of the state, Sam is deported shortly after Philip's disappearance, and though the couple are never reunited, Sam narrates the events as though he lives them every day. Even as he recounts the story for the reader in the aftermath of the war, for Sam, "time moves in one direction" while "love stands still." (94)

Reminiscent of other Second World War graphic novels, particularly Art Spiegelman's *Maus* and George Takei's *They Called Us Enemy*, *Liebestrasse* highlights the tenuous relationship between minority identities and the cultural moment of World War II. It digs into the depths of the era's history, beyond a heteronormative archive, to tell a compelling story—albeit an imagined one. As Lockard notes, "previous representations of gay/queer life in Berlin have been somewhat chaste;" thus, there is a uniqueness to *Liebestrasse* as a history that depicts "two men truly in love" in the World War II era. (100) The graphic novel's title even translates to "love street," speaking to Lockard's goal of visualizing and representing queer romance. It is a reference not to a physical place, but to the concept of remembering queer spaces. Despite outside threats to their safety, Sam and Philip made every space they shared together a "love street." Importantly, the narrative demonstrates the struggles and perseverance of LGBTQ+ individuals within an era of persecution and in a history that often ignores their existence.

Though the couple may be fictional, their story connects to incredibly tangible images of the past: underground gay bars, police raids, public antisemitism, and the rise of the fascist state. Lockard and co-creators offer readers a glimpse into the research process used to depict this history in a section they title "Creating *Liebestrasse*." This section sets the book apart from more traditional graphic novels and instead places it more in line with a conventional monograph. Lockard includes, for instance, a list of his references with annotations about the primary and secondary sources that informed *Liebestrasse*'s creation. (106) In outlining the research process, Lockard and co-creators have invited readers to understand the history told in *Liebestrasse* while also providing a guidebook for pursuing further information.

Liebestrasse would make a powerful addition to an undergraduate syllabus because it embodies the best of what a graphic novel can do within history instruction: it offers students an accessible starting point in their learning of history. Though art as a form may make these narratives seem less argumentative than a traditional

monograph, the visual nature of comics advances an argument through the combinations of color, text, characters, and creators' storylines, all of which can be analyzed in a classroom setting. Moreover, comics as a visual media offer readers the chance to see, rather than imagine through the verbal or written word, specific realities. In the case of stories like *Maus*, *They Called Us Enemy*, and now *Liebestrasse*, readers engage with the darkest elements of the past in ways that remind them of the lived consequences of atrocities. They are encouraged to see the past as complex—a place where historical subjects negotiated their identities in terms of their societies, rather than a desolate landscape of facts and dates.

Crucial to using a graphic novel successfully in the classroom is acknowledging that no single book can capture the entirety of history, or even of a single historical moment. Graphic novels are often critiqued for their brevity, which contributes to the misplaced belief that comics as an art form are simplistic or juvenile. Such a view ignores the power that a short narrative possesses. A historical graphic novel like *Liebestrasse*, particularly because of its bibliographic entries, has the ability to spark larger conversations about the snippets of time it depicts. It is not intended to be the single authoritative text on queer representation in Germany. Instead, it and other graphic novels are narratives that encourage their readers to ask questions.

In the case of *Liebestrasse*, Lockard and his co-creators crafted a story predicated on questions of what and how. How do historians understand sexuality in relation to the Holocaust? How do we understand the place of memories and loss when crafting historical narratives? What stories remain to be studied in traditional archives? These core questions could be the foundations of undergraduate coursework that introduces students to both content and process. Underground gay bars, for instance, is content that can be spun out into a robust lecture. Similarly, students could gain invaluable insight into queer histories by comparing Sam and Philip's stories to oral histories or memoirs, thereby broadening what they learn from the graphic novel. In a methodology class, students could use the annotated bibliography to embark upon research, aligning the depictions of Nazism, sexuality, and memory in the graphic novel to both primary and secondary sources they explore on their own. The core questions and history presented in *Liebestrasse* can guide instructors and students down any number of paths like these, demonstrating the high adaptability of the text in a classroom setting.

In the classroom, *Liebestrasse* provides a unique and accessible gateway into larger discussions around queer life and the power of memory in twentieth-century history. For the skeptical educator, it is an excellent candidate for introducing the graphic novel into undergraduate curriculum. Importantly, in a moment where the narratives of marginalized communities remain under threat, *Liebestrasse* is a tangible reminder of how powerful representation, particularly visual representation, can be in the classroom.

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