

Xcellent!: X/1999 Manga Review

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Historian's Note: This manga is still (as of 2005) not yet complete!

Webmaster's Note: This manga (as of 2016) has been on hiatus since 2003. Good luck finishing it.

I never thought that I would be hooked. I never thought it would become an obsession, and yet, somehow, X caught my eye and hasn't left my mind since I got my dirty little hands on the manga. I don't really know what first attracted me to series. Perhaps it was because I was getting a little staid from doing a little too much homework, or perhaps I had finally lost it, watching too many episodes of ultra-cheesy, anime episodes dubbed in English. Whatever it was, I was ready for something deep, something mysterious, something with real action, and most importantly, something without corny dialogue!

X has no corny dialogue, and it is definitely action-packed, not to mention, mysterious. In fact, the series is so mysterious that when the manga first begins you don't really know what is going on. All you know is that this boy, Kamui, has returned to Tokyo after several years of self-imposed exile, sent there by his now-deceased mother with the cryptic promise that his destiny awaits him in the city. There, he runs into his old childhood sweetheart, Kotori, a sweet shy girl with a weak heart. He also meets her protective and gentle older brother, Fuma, another childhood friend. And yet, when Kamui finally sees them, he wants nothing to do with either of his old companions. In fact, he tells Kotori that their relationship is over; he never wants her to be near him again.

As the story unfolds, we find out the reason why: Kamui is special, a person with wondrously strong occult powers. He's also the one who will decide the fate of the world. Based on his choice, the world will be destroyed or preserved on that apocalyptic decision day in 1999 (or so everyone says). Because of that Kamui is being followed (chased, actually) by persons and things who want to either destroy him or ally with him. There seems to be three factions: a group called the Dragons of Heaven (who want to save the current world); the Dragons of Earth (who want to destroy the current world to replace it with a better version); and a mysterious final group whose purpose and membership is not entirely clear. All we know is that this last group stops

at nothing in its quest, even murdering Kamui's closest friends and relations. Kamui, however, wants nothing to do with any of these groups. He wants to live his life, and to save the ones he loves, especially Kotori. Unfortunately, as we find out in the manga, he can't seem to escape his dangerous destiny, and despite Kamui's best efforts, Kotori and Fuma are still pulled, unawares and against their will, into an occult battle for the fate of the world. Will Kamui face his destiny after all? Will he be able to change fate, and save the one he loves the most? Will he choose to be a Dragon of Heaven or a Dragon of Earth? And what is Fuma's real role: is he there to protect Kamui or to destroy him? And what will Kamui do if he has to face off against his old, supposedly innocent friend?

Those are the questions that make X much more satisfying than most anime series. Usually, I'm not that much of a fan of serious and dramatic storylines, but the mysterious quality of the plot just pulls you in. After all, with a title like X, what else could this series be but mysterious? Thankfully, though, X just doesn't hint at mystery, it actually pulls it off, not only by leaving you in the air half the time about the direction of the plot, but also by adding some exotic references to mystical lore. You'll find references to the Tarot (each of the characters appears on a different Tarot card on the cover), the Bible, and Kaballah in this manga. The series incorporates those elements as integral parts of the storyline, but thankfully it doesn't force you to learn the terminology to follow the story, which is pretty easy to understand despite its convoluted nature. (I do recommend, though, that you do find out a little bit more about these subjects anyway, since it just adds that much more complexity and depth to the plot. Rabi's X page has some great links for this).

The characters are also far from shallow or uninteresting. Everyone has a distinct personality, and CLAMP does a good job of developing the motivations behind each character, both in the regular part of the manga and in the special character moments at the end. Kamui teeters between selfish defiance and a grudging realization of his fate, especially when he sees the vision where Kotori is about to be killed. Fuma is the protective older brother, and yet at times becomes a devilish adversary whose powers seem even stronger than Kamui's. Kotori is the weak one, and yet you have to appreciate her spiritual strength, though she does lose it somewhat near the end of the eighth volume. Besides these characters, you can't help cheering on the sunny-natured Sorata, who enlivens the dramatic plot with jokes and who lives to please even though he knows he's fated to die. And I think that any girl who has a sword come out of her definitely falls under the category of "interesting"! And those are some of the characters! The rest are equally fascinating, with their own distinctive powers and histories. A couple of characters even appear from CLAMP's other mangas, since the world is set in the same one as Tokyo Babylon!

Artistically, I think the covers are gorgeous, with deeply rich and bold colors, and well-designed artwork. The black and white drawings in the manga are also fine (CLAMP is excellent at doing great character poses), though sometimes the drawings are a little stiff and awkward. Some people might also find the pages cluttered, because CLAMP has a tendency to draw a lot of things all tightly packed together, with many inset windows and tons of violently chaotic action scenes. Also, the artists occasionally have this bad habit of not drawing in the faces, which is perhaps a convention, but which makes for a very strange look (no pun intended!). Finally, the authors also don't hesitate when it comes to drawing violent scenes. During the first couple of volumes, you get to see cut-up body parts and similarly grotesque images, so this is definitely not a manga for the weak of heart!

Besides this propensity for violence, I think almost anyone can enjoy the series, especially those who like mystery, action, and great characters. X isn't perfect, of course. The plot starts out a little slow (just because you have so many characters and issues to introduce) at first, and the number of characters can leave you confused about who is who in the beginning. But those things pass quickly once you start getting past the third volume. The worse flaw, in my opinion, doesn't have to do with plot or character names though. It has to do with the timing of publication! The series is slated to be 22 volumes, but so far, only eight volumes have come out in the past eight years (What a record, huh? And this is just in Asia). You can see then that it might take a long time to finish this manga, which is a shame, since the last volume ends at such a cliff-hanger-like moment. Also, even though the manga has been picked up in America by Viz (it's called for X/1999, for reasons I won't go into here), it's pretty hard to find the entire eight volumes at your corner anime store, since Viz seems determined to print just a couple of pages of the manga every month.

Thankfully, though, for those who just want to read the story, and leave the pretty images for later, Rabi's site has the scripts (in English) for the first seven volumes (not the eighth, so you won't be able to find out about Fuma!). She promises the eighth one soon, but that message has been there for a while, so I wouldn't get my hopes up too high. Also, supposedly someone is subbing the newly-released X movie, which premiered in Japan last August. It tells the 22-volume story by squishing the plot so that everything happens in one day. However, according to Rabi, the ending in the movie might end up being different than the manga's ending! I have yet to see this movie, though there is a Quicktime clip for it somewhere out there (It's cool--I recommend getting it. The action is exciting and the music is great!).

Otherwise, though, if you become as obsessed with the series as I've become, try checking out these links. They might (^_^) hold you over till the next manga volume comes out!