

Malaak to the rescue!

Omar Al Fil

Women in Lebanon regularly battle sexism and prejudice, but one in particular finds herself head-to-head with 'jinn' militiamen and mythical beasts.

Malaak is Lebanon's one and only fictional super-heroine and the main character of the 'Malaak' comic book series, written and illustrated by Joumana Medlej. Malaak is a young woman of mysterious origins who, on discovering that she possesses supernatural abilities, takes it upon herself to protect Beirut from jinn villainy.

Medlej (born and raised in Beirut) studied graphic design at the American University of Beirut. When not writing and illustrating her comics, she is art director for Jordan-based digital entertainment company, Quirkat, and co-authors children's books on Lebanese heritage, among other projects.

Though they have a small but devoted following, comics are not exactly a mainstream medium in Lebanon; but that was irrelevant to Medlej. "No other medium could have told this particular story, although it's likely that it came to me precisely because I'm so naturally inclined towards sequential art," she explains. People's attitude and finances are irrelevant." Medlej adds: "If you're making marketing decisions you have to take the receiving end into account, but creative decisions are made entirely on the basis of the creation itself."

The comic stays faithful to our beloved local tradition of linguistic collage. Dialogue is not limited to a single language, as Lebanese Arabic phrases pop up every now and then and a glossary page is

found at the end of each book. Medlej justifies her decision: "That's the way we speak. It would have sounded unnatural, and a lot less fun, if I forced them to stick to a single language."

One of the more obvious features of the books is Malaak's sex. Medlej says she did not meditate long on this detail: "the story 'arrived' this way." She adds: "Being a Lebanese female myself, that is the kind of character I can project best; with a male, the story would take a very different turn."

It may seem that metaphors and messages on gender and war are stitched into the fabric of the tale, but Medlej denies this, stating: "There's a lot for the reader to ponder, but I'm not telling them what to conclude from it. That's not the point of graphic novels, although in this part of the world people seem unable to dissociate storytelling from preaching."

Though the first of the books was published in 2007, Medlej says the series still needs time before any significant impact is noticed. "You have to remember that only a small percentage of the population reads comics, if they read anything at all." She adds, "In Lebanon you will find the book in most bookshops, though they have a tendency to bury it somewhere in the children's section."

Medlej does not gear her work towards a specific audience, hoping rather to attract Lebanese readers in general. "I would particularly like the Lebanese to embrace the character," she says. "I believe those who read the series largely have [embraced



Scene from Part II 'Malaak: Battles and Scars'. Malaak is learning martial arts.

her], because she really is one of us and the story could not be more Lebanese, being set in Beirut, drawing on our collective memory, speaking our language and tackling an issue that concerns us all."

Though the fictional Malaak could be considered an ideal role model

for young Lebanese women, so could Medlej. "I hope I'm showing [young Lebanese women] that they don't need anyone's help to realize their projects if they are motivated enough, and also, [I hope that I am] inspiring them to express themselves creatively and bring

something fresh into the world, without considering whether it'll be accepted or successful."

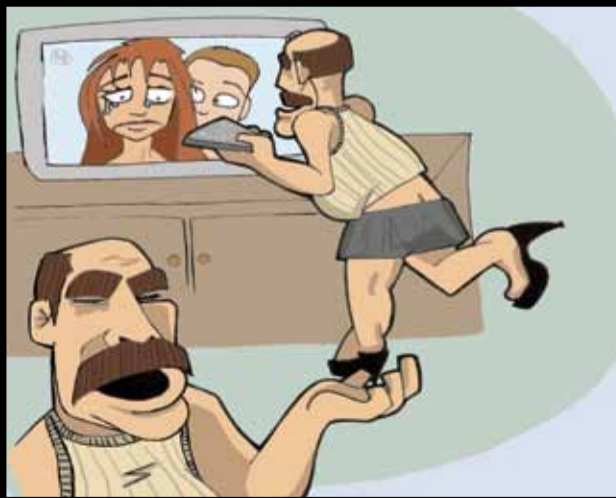
Medlej is currently working on the fourth installment of her series. To learn more, visit malaakonline.com.

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