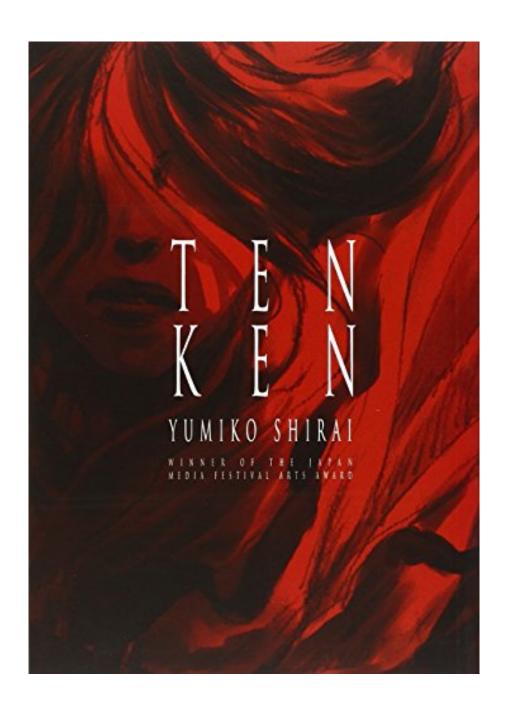


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About the Author

Yumiko Shirai is a self-made illustrator and author. This is her first major work in Japan and marks her U.S. debut. It took Yumiko a total of ten years from conceptualization to completion for this work of visual artistry. Yumiko's work has also appeared in various magazines, newspapers, and children's educational books.

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The world has been annihilated and an evil bestial deity must be appeased. Saki, a young girl trying to escape destiny, finds refuge in an unusual and rough line of work. But she has been chosen for an unthinkable role: a princess must be sacrificed to the monster, Yamata-no-Orochi, at the fifty-year Tenken Festival. Can Manaka, the man in love with Saki, follow her into this abyss to save her from fate...only to discover the dark secret of the ceremony? Winner of the prestigious Japan Media Festival Arts Award, this stunning work of graphic fiction takes the reader into a whole new realm.

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Most helpful customer reviews

4 of 4 people found the following review helpful. Susano-o, the dragon Orochi and the Princess Kushiinada By Zack Davisson It is very rare that I come across a comic book that I think truly deserves the name "Graphic Novel." For 99% of the stuff out there, be they American or Japanese, the term "comic book" works just fine. They are serialized ongoing adventures, light entertainment and a genre I really love. They are comic books.

Yumiko Shirai's "Tenken," on the other hand, is a true Graphic Novel. Conceived and created over a ten year period, "Tenken" is a complex and complete story, rendered in beautiful inks with a deft hand that walks the thin border between illustration and art.

A blend of science fiction with Japanese mythology, "Tenken" mixes the ancient legend of Susano-o, the dragon Orochi and the Princess Kushiinada with an unnamed dystopian future marred by the cycle of war and recovery.

Set sometime after the "dirty war" when the planet has become tainted by a mysterious pollution called "fukashi" (the term can mean "invisible" in Japanese, although I am not sure if that is the allusion here.) Fukashi taints the Earth's soil, but it has been discovered that (in shades of Nausicaa of the Valley of the Wind) bamboo has the property of being able to draw the fukashi from the soil, thus cleansing it and making it safe for farming. The bamboo turns blue in the process, and becomes a giant poison stick that needs to be dealt with. Only those over the age of thirty-five have the job of clearing the fukashi forests, which is generally fatal.

At the opening of the book, we meet Manaka, the boss of a construction crew that uses clean bamboo for high-rise construction projects. One day he meets a teenage girl named Saki who wants to work for him. Saki claims to be a village girl fleeing an arranged marriage, and Manaka asks no questions. She loves to work the high-rise jobs, but has an overwhelming fear of being underground. Manaka and his crew is getting ready for the Tenken festival, and annual event marking the marriage of the Princess Kushiinada to the handsome "Master Orochi." This is a special year for Tenken, as every fifty years there is a special festival, and rumors of a "hidden festival" where a chosen girl is actually sacrificed to the dragon rather than just playing the part. Of course, it is not long before Manaka and Saki are caught up in this, and are quick to learn that legend is not always divorced from reality, and it is up to Manaka to discover and embody the lost character of the legend, Susano-o the dragon slayer.

Blending ancient mythology with Science Fiction is a somewhat classic combination (think Stargate), but Shirai keeps the focus more on the myth than the future. She is dealing with the primal here, the Earth-forces and hungers of the gods that stay constant no matter how much the humans advance and retreat. The Susanoo legend has been dealt with before in Masamune Shiro's Orion, but this is a much more serious and somber take.

I loved "Tenken." There was a nice balance here of story, and Shirai's artwork is lovely. She has very a nice painterly feel, full of smudged inks and emotion combined with controlled line work. She does a great job with the facial expressions, and pulls all the possible drama out of a scene.

The only possible difficulty I can see with "Tenken" is that it assumes a familiarity with the Susano-o/Orochi/Kushiinada legend. To a Japanese audience, this would be so familiar that it no more needs to be explained than "A guy named Noah with a Really Big Boat" would need to be explained to Western audiences. That makes the bar of entry higher than normal manga, but worth it.

6 of 7 people found the following review helpful. THIS, FOR ME, WAS AN AMAZING NEW JOURNEY INTO UNFAMILIAR GOUND By D. Blankenship First, it must be understood that this review is being written by someone (me) who is completely unfamiliar with the magna genre. That is not to say though that I am unfamiliar with the graphic novel. I became an avid comic book reader in the 1940s through the transitioned into the appreciation and love for the graphic novel as it evolved through the 1960s to present. I do understand that aspect of this book. I understand art and its blend with a minimum (or none in some cases) of words.

I was contacted by the publishers of this work as to the possibility of doing a review and after checking with a couple of friends who were not only familiar with magna, but with this author in particular, decided to follow their advice and expand my reading horizons and give it a shot.

This review is being written by a very uninformed reviewer who is just beginning to explore this genre and it must be understood that in no way am I an expert. I am absolutely positive that I have missed many of the subtle nuances of this work...they were quite likely well over my head. This review will perhaps give a different slant. After all, for a work to be successful, for an art mode or form to be successful, they must have new converts and you have to start somewhere.

My first difficulty with this work, if difficult you want to call it, was that I was completely clueless as to Japanese mythology. This story deals with the myth of Susanoo and Orochi. Hey, I never heard of them. Fortunately for me; for all of us, we have computers and I took care of that problem with a flick of my mouse and a bit of delightful reading. Now this new knowledge I gain...always a good thing, along with an appreciation of good art (I feel on solid ground in the area of art), I was on my way.

I must say I was impressed right from the start. I did have difficulty following the story at first simply through ignorance. Once I was able to figure out what the author was trying to do and change my mind-set somewhat...I sort of got into the "flow" of the work, all was well.

The author has mixed fantasy, Science Fiction, mythology and her own imagination to create a rather stunning work...from my perspective. I have and had absolutely nothing to compare this work with so I had to judge it on its own merits; did it touch me, did it hold my interest, did I understand it, did it leave me wanting more, was I impressed...an on an on. I must say that I had to answer yes to each of these.

One of the benchmarks by which I judge all graphic novels is "can I understand, to a point, the story; the plot and the direction of the novel by simply looking at the pictures and completely ignoring the text. If I can hit a 75 percent positive rate here then I know, in my case, that I have a winner on my hands. This work, even though culturally, I was behind the curve, delivered in this area. Ignorance is a horrid and handicapping thing...when I started reading this work I fully understood how bad it was, but on the other hand, it reinforced my delight in learning something new. This was a good thing.

Now as to the art work...WOW. For me art is something that I either like or do not like. It either touches me, or it does not. I have viewed petro graphs scratched in rock on canyon sides that have moved and touched me to tears, as well as wonderful paintings and sculptures in fine museums. I have myself created doodles on my note pad that when I viewed them at a later date, brought a lump to my throat. Art is so very, very personal. Yumiko Shirai again, for me, delivers. This novel is in complete black and white and what she has done with shading, with washes and finely drawn scenes is truly amazing. There are at least 100 plates in this work that I would be proud to frame and hang on my wall....absolutely stunning and moving. I suppose it is a case that I cannot explain to you in words what good art is, but by golly, I know it when I see it.

Can I recommend this work via the eyes and senses of a "clueless one?" You bet. This work made a believer of me and I am so grateful to have new doors opened to me because I read it...three times already, to be

honest.

Don Blankenship The Ozarks

6 of 7 people found the following review helpful.

An Impressive Graphic Novel, But...

By tvtv3

TENKEN is a graphic novel manga that blends sci-fi with Japanese mythology. Divided into nine chapters, the story is set sometime in the future after a "dirty war" has tainted much of the planet. The story begins with the introduction of Manaka, a construction crew supervisor. One of his hardest workers is a young girl named Saki. Manaka met Saki one night at a bar. She pleaded to let her work for him and he agreed. She claimed she had fled from the mountains to escape an arranged marriage. Manka and his team are in the midst of preparing for the annual Tenken celebration, a festival that reenacts the myth of Susanoo and Orochi and the marriage of Susanoo to Princess Kushinada.

According to the myth, Susanoo was walking along the Earth when he came across an old man and old woman weeping bitterly over a young girl between them. The old man explains to Susanoo that the reason they are weeping is that they had eight daughters, but for the past seven years a multi-headed serpent has come and devoured one of the daughters. Kushinada is the last of the sisters and the serpent is due to arrive and eat her, too. Susanoo asks that if he kills the serpent, will they give him Kushinada's hand in marriage. The couple agrees. Susanoo turns the girl into a hair comb and places it in his hair. He then has the couple brew eight barrels of sake and helps them build eight stalls to place the sake. He places a barrel of sake inside each stall. When the serpent, named Orochi, comes he places each of his heads in the barrels and drinks and falls asleep. While the beast sleeps, Susanoo takes his sword and cuts each of the heads off and then cuts the great snake to pieces. He returns Kushinada to her human form and they are married.

In the novel, Tenken is the annual celebration that memorializes the event. However, each fifty years the event is a particularly significant celebration, larger and more ambitious than in other years. In the mountains it is rumored that every fifty years a "hidden festival" takes place where the girl playing Kushinada in their festival is actually sacrificed to Orochi. Manaka soon learns that Saki is actually the girl who has been chosen as this year's Princess Kushinada in the mountains and that she has been running not from an arranged marriage, but from an arranged sacrifice. The people of the village believe that a female must be offered to Orochi every fifty years otherwise terrible things happen. Soon Saki believes the story, too, which leaves Manaka to decide if he can be like Susanoo and save the girl from the dragon.

Unlike a lot of books that are marketed as graphic novels, TENKEN is a true graphic novel. It's not a collection of comic books, nor is it a visual adaptation of a literary work. Instead, it is a novel that was conceived as being read in story-board format. For that, I give Yumiko Shirai credit. Not everyone can write a book and there are even fewer who not only write a book, but storyboard the entire thing out.

It should also be noted that TENKEN isn't just a graphic novel, but it's a manga. What that means is that the story is read from right to left instead of left to right.

The illustrations are done in black and white and, like the overall plot of the story, combine a dystopian sci-fi style with fantastical dreamlike images. Shirai does a good job of balancing and meshing the two, but there were several moments that I became confused and wasn't able to decipher what was happening until a few panels later. This didn't happen very much in the first third of the story, but happened more in the middle section, and happened during the last third.

My biggest problem with TENKEN is that I really didn't like the story, particularly towards the end. I realize that part of it is because of my ignorance of Japanese culture. Perhaps, if I had known about the Susanoo story before I started reading TENKEN, I might have appreciated it better. But, even though I'm college educated and like learning new things and trying new experiences, I `m just a poor white American and the last part of TENKEN didn't make much sense to me. I think it has to do with the spirit of Orochi, a giant eight-headed snake, possessing the soul of a man so that he can use that soul to lead a woman to him every fifty years so that he can merge with her soul and then let her body rot. Orochi is apparently real, but he only exits in the spirit world, but even though no one can see him (except those who are the modern embodiments of gods who once walked the Earth), he does come out and cause death, mayhem, and destruction, especially every fifty years if someone tries to get in the way of his new "princess". Of course, I'm not even sure if that's even right because the last part of the story was confusing for me and I had a difficult time figuring out what was happening.

I can see TENKEN being extremely popular with those who enjoy magna and/or Japanese culture. I also believe it's a book that those who have a serious interest in graphic novels will at least appreciate. I can also see someone who has an interest in studying myths, legends, fables, etc. from different parts of the world might like TENKEN. Personally, I appreciated reading it and think it's an excellent graphic novel, but was really confused by parts of the story which hampered my enjoyment.

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