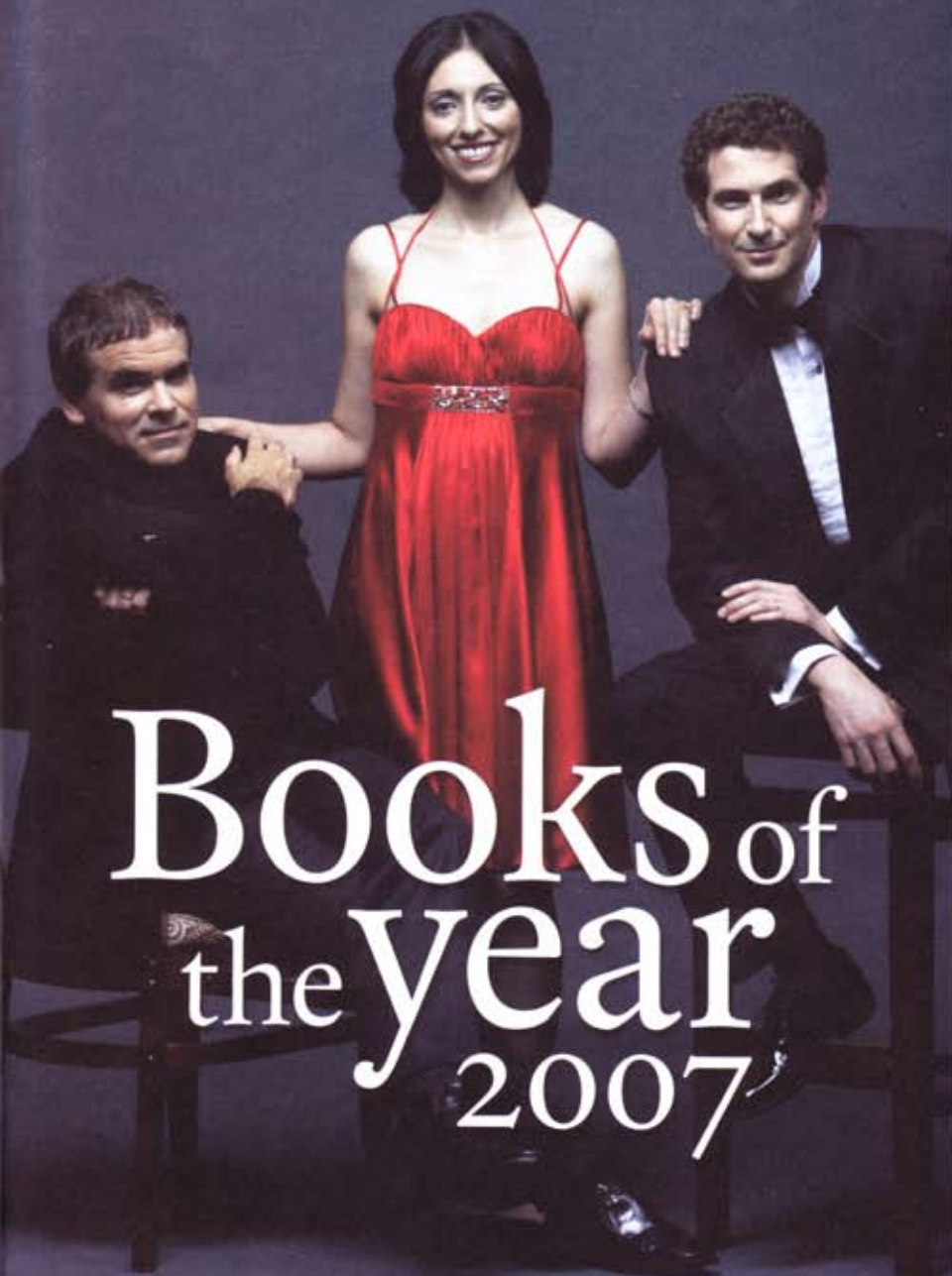


GRAPHICA



Books of the year 2007

Spent
Joe Matt

(Drawn & Quarterly, \$22.95)
In the annals of confessional Loser Lit, few capture the minute details of their own downfall with as much glee and obsessiveness as cartoonist Joe Matt. Matt, an American who lived in Toronto for years and now lives in Los Angeles, has been dissecting his character flaws, doomed relationships, and feverish VHS porn-tape dubbing in his comic book *Peepshow* since the early 1990s. *Spent* collects the last four issues of *Peepshow* in a series of loosely related stories dealing with Matt's life after he is dumped by his girlfriend. The title refers to juices both creative and otherwise, and asks the question: after nearly 20 years of navel-gazing, has he finally run out?

The best of Matt's work is exemplified in the third story of the collection. It's set entirely in a diner, where Joe and fellow cartoonists Seth and Chester Brown have lunch while their conversation plays out like an episode of *Seinfeld*: nothing in particular happens besides some casual cruelty between friends. Matt blocks out this dialogue with great effect. Neither as precious as Seth's nor as meticulous as Brown's, his drawings offer a directness and simplicity that works for their subject matter. And again, like a sitcom, his stories are told almost exclusively in closeups, with the added emphasis

of cartoony distortion that enhances their emotional content.

The final story returns to Joe alone at his rooming house and is yet another running monologue about masturbation marathons, disgusting hygiene habits, and failed cartooning ambitions. This becomes tedious, but for every complaint readers might have, Matt beats them to the punch. As he says while examining old pages: "It's not even a story.... just page after page of me whining about porn. It's masturbation in comics form." True enough. But is this self-awareness just another cop-out?

Before we can find out, the story comes to a slapstick conclusion, with slamming doors and cat diarrhea. Despite the thematic repetitiveness and exhaustion, the book still evokes the sense of an ending. Matt may finally be ready to move on to new material. In the meantime, *Spent* is funny, painful, and ultimately about nothing. Think of it as a guilty pleasure. — Ian Daffern



White Rapids
Pascal Blanchet;
Helge Duscher, trans.
(Drawn & Quarterly, \$29.95)

For its breathtaking art alone, Quebec cartoonist Pascal Blanchet's *White Rapids* (*Rapide Blanc* in its original French format, published last year by Editions de La Pastèque) is a flawless masterpiece. In this true story of the rise and fall of a Quebec town established solely to support a hydroelectric dam, Blanchet channels the architectural iconography of Darwyn Cooke as well as the nostalgic fascination of Seth — fellow award-winning Canucks both — but his visual style is entirely his own. Originality bleeds off of every gorgeous, pastel-tinged page, even when the majestic double-page spreads that comprise the majority of the book reference mundane real-life imagery such as office building directories, relief maps, or vintage transportation posters. Beautiful and unique flourishes, such as having a telephone pole stand in as the "T" in a word, are found throughout.

The story begins with the boardroom birth of the titular town in the 1920s and ends wistfully when 1970s automation forces its desertion. *White Rapids* itself is the main character; the town brims with people — all familiar types, but also anonymous. Effectively so: in the final pages, one father's tearful bridge-side farewell becomes the reader's. — Gary Butler