

***Lulu Eightball*, by Emily Flake**

Atomic Books Company, 96 pages.

Some comics fans were blindsided when Emily Flake's first collection of cartoons, *Lulu Eightball*, appeared, seemingly out of nowhere, at the top of *Entertainment Weekly*'s "Musts" list, beating out even Bill Murray. Only the dorkwad cognoscenti of comics could have remained ignorant for so long of one of the smartest and funniest weekly cartoons in America. Flipping through Flake's first collection, you are guaranteed to laugh aloud every few pages, but—here's the Monkey's Paw catch—it will be the cringing, shamefaced laughter of reluctant self-recognition. My own favorite cartoon shows a robot and a blow-up doll at a table set for a romantic dinner, captioned: "It's no more doomed than your relationship." Oof. Even when her premises are just silly instead of self-revealing ("Rock Stars of the Insect World"), Flake always pulls them off with some inspired absurdity ("The Würm").

Like most cartoonists with weekly deadlines, Flake draws exactly as well as she needs to. Most of these cartoons look as though they were scratched on cocktail napkins at last call—which is, one suspects, when they were conceived. And yet her characters, with their doughy bellies and Orphan Annie eyes, are surprisingly expressive: ingenuous, deluded, ineptly conniving. She has a comedienne's ear for language (tough city pigeons sneering to a robin: "Yeah, wit' your hop-hop-hop and your 'Ooh! Lookit me! I'm da fuckin' boid a' spring!'"") and telepathic insight into your pettiest, most unworthy thoughts ("You've put on weight and I'm glad **GLAD GLAD**"). There are, perhaps, more jokes about fat than one might wish—this seems like material better left to the likes of

Cathy Guisewhite--but cellulite seems to be to women what feces is to children: a subject so fraught with anxiety that it is automatically hysterical.¹ What makes Flake's cartoons so passionately loved by her fans is that they speak to their most painful middle-school insecurities, the fear that you're not pretty or feminine or competent enough, that you're a fuckup and a failure not just as a girl but as a grownup--a fear epitomized by the cartoon in which our heroine gets her adulthood officially revoked for having bourbon and cake for dinner.

Flake's humor is often self-deprecating, but not self-loathing in the creepy and grandstanding manner of Crumb or Brunetti. Although these cartoons are all about I.M. breakups and Tuesday morning hangovers, low self-esteem and poor judgment, puking on your shoes on the way to work and waking up with your hair in the toilet, they're never truly bitter. Her cynical cover is blown by her sentimental love of pirates and monkeys and pot-bellied bald men. Her foreign millipede, with his many flailing little hands and desperately earnest broken English, breaks my heart. Her cartoon of an old man waving goodbye to nobody as he leaves a dive bar while "Desperado" plays on the jukebox isn't a cartoon at all; it's a poem, masquerading as a cartoon so as not to be thought faggy and get beaten up by rap songs. No matter how tough and jaded and wisecracking it wants to seem, Emily Flake's work is secretly softhearted and sad, full of a rueful fondness for our bottomless genius for self-defeat. As the Holy Spirit (depicted as one of the ghosts from Pac-Man) observes in her cartoon "Making God Laugh": "Isn't it cute, how they just keep trying stuff?"

¹ The equivalent for men is, of course, sex.