

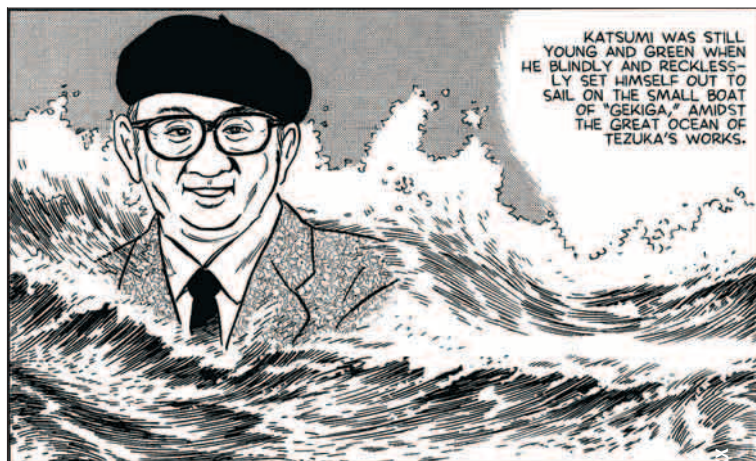
In his autobiography, Yoshihiro Tatsumi, the pioneer of a dark form of manga, reflects on a life outside the lines, writes **Dwight Garner**

Drawn apart

Underground comics took root in the US in the 1960s and ripened with the counterculture; artists such as Robert Crumb, Kim Deitch and Art Spiegelman discarded the old funny-page formats and themes like so many corn husks. In Japan, however, there had already been a comics revolution and the man in its vanguard was Yoshihiro Tatsumi.

Tatsumi, born in 1935, came of age alongside Japan's postwar obsession with manga. Most manga takes place in a bright, alternate universe where it seems as if any problem might be resolved with a cute-off: batting eyelashes at 10 paces.

Tatsumi began drawing manga as a child in Osaka, but he quickly rebelled against the form's aesthetic limitations. Manga was aimed largely at children and its emotional and intellectual palette was circumscribed. Along with a cohort of young writers and illustrators, Tatsumi introduced in the late 1950s



a bolder form of manga he called *gekiga* – darker, more realistic, often violent. The name stuck. And he became one of the most important visual artists in Japan.

Tatsumi's work, long unavailable in English, has begun to be translated and issued by Canadian

publishing house Drawn and Quarterly in an annual series of books edited by cartoonist Adrian Tomine. Now comes the big kahuna: Tatsumi's outsize autobiography, *A Drifting Life*.

It is a book that manages to be, all at once, an insider's history of manga, a mordant cultural tour of post-Hiroshima Japan and a scrappy portrait of a struggling artist. It is a big, fat, greasy tub of salty popcorn for anyone interested in the theory and practice of Japanese comics.

Manga is fundamentally a young person's game. Tatsumi is 73 and *A Drifting Life* took him 10 years to write. But no strain of composition shows in the book's 855 pages, which chronicle his career from 1945 to 1960, the period of its greatest ferment.

If success came quickly, confidence did not. Tatsumi's family was poor. His father was barely employed. His mother and three siblings made do as well as they could. Drawing manga was the author's ticket to ride.

Once he finished with school, Tatsumi began toiling in the exploitative field of "rental manga". These books were grab-bag collections that printed the work of several artists; readers borrowed them from shops like video tapes. Publishing houses cranked out rental manga, sometimes cramming writers and illustrators into communal apartments for weeks.

Tatsumi does not deny the pleasures of this kind of quick-and-dirty work. His comics were being devoured by a wide and eager audience and he was honing his craft. "For this 19-year-old boy with no guarantees for his future," he writes, "the only place where he felt alive was in the realm of imagination." There was "no freedom in reality", he continues, but "any kind of transformation was possible in the imaginary world".

All along, however, Tatsumi was also dreaming of something better: experimental work, "manga that isn't manga". He became obsessed with movies, both American and Japanese, and took note of their stylized visuals and their cool realism. He wanted to produce narrative comics instead of "manga with wild characters jumping about"

or "manga that concerns itself with punch lines".

As *A Drifting Life* progresses it becomes clear that Tatsumi is not content merely to tell his own story or just the story of *gekiga*. He charts Japan's small cultural milestones in the wake of the war. This book begins with a panel depicting Emperor Hirohito's surrender but soon moves on to topics such as Japan's first domestically manufactured washing machine, its Miss Universe contestants, maritime disasters and taste for Coca-Cola. It is ground-level pop history.

The charge against graphic novels or memoirs is that they're a bastard form that guarantees that both the art and the writing will be second-rate. There is a speck of truth there, to the extent that the relationship between illustration and prose, in long-form comics, is symbiotic: you wouldn't necessarily want to pry one from the other.

A book such as *A Drifting Life* is easy to pick apart on a drawing-by-drawing or line-by-line basis. Don't make that mistake.

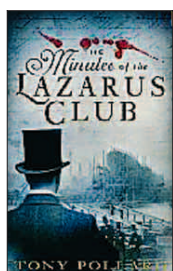
Its pleasures are cumulative: the book has a rolling, rumbling grandeur. It is as if someone had taken a Haruki Murakami novel and drawn, beautifully and comprehensively, in its margins. *The New York Times*

***A Drifting Life* by Yoshihiro Tatsumi, Drawn and Quarterly Publications, HK\$240**



Review of the week

FICTION



The Minutes of the Lazarus Club
by Tony Pollard
Michael Joseph
HK\$234
★★★★☆
Nick Ryan

The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen meets *Sherlock Holmes*: that concept will give you some indication of where Tony Pollard's "gaslight" drama enters the crowded thriller market.

Set in the 1850s, *The Minutes of the Lazarus Club* is a hefty tome sporting a cast including Isambard Kingdom Brunel, renowned engineer of the Victorian age; naturalist Charles Darwin; Michael Faraday, physicist and chemist; inventor Charles Babbage and Joseph Bazalgette, creator of London's sewer system, all brought

together by the author, a battlefield and forensic archaeologist who has clearly done a great deal of research.

The protagonist, surgeon George Phillips, plunges into the secret world of the Lazarus Club with an introduction from the cigar-flaunting Brunel, offering to rescue him from the irascible clutches of a power-hungry hospital boss, Sir Benjamin Brodie. Brunel displays an intense interest in what Phillips can tell him about the workings of the heart and attends all his dissections and lectures.

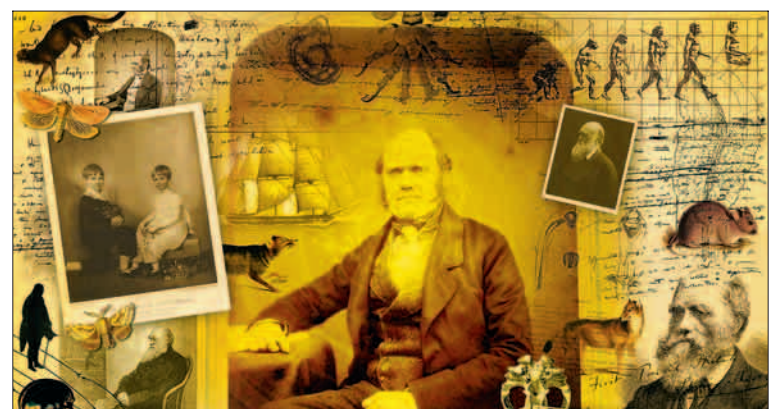
Invited by Brunel to talk to a select group of scientists and forward thinkers, Phillips meets most of the significant players in the Industrial Revolution. It is at the Lazarus Club that these great actors of history discuss revolutionary technological and social concepts: it is also a gentleman's world, full of port, claret but invention and progress too.

Drawn deep into Brunel's life in particular, Phillips is right there at pivotal moments, such as the launch

of the great engineer's enormous iron-clad ship, *The Great Eastern*, which stalls and kills several workers. He is present as Darwin muses on his theories and shares his somewhat ludicrous views on his own supposed ailments; and he delves into Bazalgette's sewers as they are being constructed.

He even forms a relationship with the heroine of the Crimea, Florence Nightingale – between manly visits to a brothel, of course.

But *The Minutes of the Lazarus Club* would not be a thriller without some form of skullduggery: Phillips, visits to "his club" and nocturnal associations aside, is slowly drawn into a morass of suspicion, murder and intrigue seemingly emanating – to his horror – from his new associates. Horribly mutilated corpses are dragged from the Thames, for which an increasingly suspicious police inspector begins to question him; there is the development of a new secret weapon; sabotage of Brunel's ship; and the almost obligatory evil agents



The many faces of Charles Darwin. Illustration: Wilson Tsang

of a foreign power on his tail. Phillips begins the novel as an innocent it seems and has to travel that path of many heroes, from suspicion to near-death, to thwart the evil at the heart of his new-found friendships.

The real strength of *The Minutes of the Lazarus Club* lies in the detailed description of life in London – and England in general – in the late 1850s and in the

consideration of the intellect, innovations and vision of the men introduced. The search for the serial killer and the threats on Phillips' life are entertaining, but the length of the novel makes the book a little clunky and slow.

Nevertheless, there is plenty to enjoy in this debut, from the virtuous and brave to the ruthless, seemingly unstoppable villains.