

Three Hundred and Twenty Million Followers

Democracy was meant not to work, because dynamic systems are fixed by their own glitches. This is the genius of the, yes, virus that America's founders released. You can trademark an idea but you can't keep people from having it. The ideas proliferate like a benevolent critical mass in *Prez*, the best new comic of the year, based on one of the craziest comics ever made.



The original (by Joe Simon and Gerry Grandenetti, who are offensively uncredited so far — ideas do belong to somebody at the start), the original is one of those things that barely happens but people never forget: a youthsplotation fantasy about a hip, teenage lefty president right after the height of the counterculture of the 1960s/early-'70s. It had five issues, and four even came out, but like the promise of liberty, it's caught fire ever since, with a beautiful, sadly utopian issue of *The Sandman* by Gaiman and Michael Allred reconceiving it, and a fantastic early opus by Ed Brubaker and Eric Shanower, the one-shot *Smells Like Teen President*, updating it for the early-1990s social malaise.

Prez's benevolent rule is a future that never happened but, in its weight upon our consciousness, never goes away. Mark Russell (not the song-and-dance Beltway satirist, even better) writes and Ben Caldwell draws the newest version, two issues in so far from "The DC You" era of revived creativity and carefully refreshed copyrights.

We're in another fantasyland, the carnivalesque dystopia of 2036, which is as recognizable to us as those who've held onto power all that time can manage — just bigger, jitteryer, sassier, dumber. The conditioning of passivity in citizens already translates mostly into us demanding the right to be not consulted but entertained — this may be why Trump is winning. In the world of the new *Prez*, media surrounds us as literally as we know it's going to, with mirage-like heads-up display images and chattering triggered-audio everywhere.

Consumerism is literal, with fast food being the IV of the masses at every turn — in the weird hologram headdresses of corporate bosses disguised in backroom tribunals as their own company mascots; in the franchising of public feeding programs to a taco chain; in the endorsements plastering everything and -one. It's a continuous feed with no nourishing content. Beth Ross is a wage-serf at a hotdog kiosk in Oregon, whose perky training video infects the internet, and, thanks to cross-platform online voting, puts her in the running as a presidential candidate, when a bored electorate tries to put mustard on the plot of a deadlocked Congress.

Russell realizes that the point of America's peril isn't that our system is broken, it's that our citizenry is brokenhearted, and wants some sense of life being more fun four years from now than it was during a Depression or a war or plague. The dysfunctions and diversions that Russell and Caldwell extrapolate in every corner of the crowded mental airspace are hilarious and horrid, the wordplay keeping one nanosecond ahead of our tendency to overload and crash. The pathos that punctures through the personal-theme-park madness, especially while Beth is trying to raise money for her dad's completely corporatized healthcare, accentuates how hard we have to laugh to get past the graveyard of empire we're moving through.

At the end of Issue Two "Preston Rickard" (a variant on the original Prez) shows up as an oldguy worming his way into the veep seat after Beth is Liked into the White House. He's so hated that he sells himself as her insurance against getting shot, and they set off, maybe, to shut down the system as we know it. This book is what we should all have rolled up in our back pockets with the little Constitution booklet near our heart — bursting with new thoughts and graphic invention, *Prez* is an idea whose time has come and is staying.

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