



A Review of You Higuri's *Gorgeous Carat*

by [Kat Avila](#)

(Warning: This review contains spoilers.)

"My one desire, all I aspire
Is in your eyes forever to live;
Traveled all over the seven oceans
There is nothing that I wouldn't give."
— from "Eyes Like Yours," sung by Shakira

INTRODUCTION

Florian's brilliant amethyst eyes, backlit by his righteous spirit, pierce through jewel thief Noir's darkness: "Pardon. Because they are such beautiful amethysts, I wanted to touch them to be certain whether they were gems or real [eyes]." Thus begins You Higuri's four-volume historical adventure series *Gorgeous Carat — The Virtue within Darkness* (Jp. *Goojasu Karatto — Kurayami no Bitoku*). The graphic novel series was published by **Shueisha, Eyes Comics**, 1999-2002. A one-volume branch story *Gorgeous Carat Galaxy* was released this past April by **Gentosha Comics, Birz Comics Girl's Collection**; slightly thicker than usual, the **GCG** novel is 248 pages long (vs. 194 pages) and includes a bonus 18-page story, also **GC**-related. *Gorgeous Carat* remains unpublished in English though this intelligent series is one of the best written and illustrated one could ever run across.

The *Gorgeous Carat* graphic novels are in the genre of boy's love, meaning they feature relationships between fantasy males created out of a matriarchal world for other women. Superficially, boy's love comics may appear to be

gay comics, but they are not (such hasty labeling ignores the creators and feminine subtext). Readers looking for overt sex scenes in Higuri's work will be quickly disenchanted as the emphasis is on romance and the art.

We follow the ***Gorgeous Carat*** characters through the provocative streets of early 20th-century Paris in France, Tangier and Fez in Morocco, and Tunis and Carthage in Tunisia. After searching for a 120-carat diamond family heirloom, we embark on a more ambitious treasure hunt for the Holy Grail itself, the chalice said to have been used at the Last Supper and/or which captured the blood of Christ as he hung from the cross. (According to another account, the Holy Grail is a stone, providing an alternative reading of the ending of ***GC***, which You Higuri may not have intended.) Certainly, if you are a history buff and familiar with French history, history of Maghreb (Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia), and stories of the Crusade-era Knights of the Temple of Solomon (Knights Templar) and the Holy Grail, you will get a lot more from ***GC*** than the average reader. Otherwise, as an armchair tourist, you will pick up much by paying attention to the visual and textual details, e.g., you will learn that "Moroccan whiskey" is actually a very, very sweet tea.

There are three major story divisions in ***Gorgeous Carat***. Vol. 1 has two chapters, "The Flame of Magar" and "Petit Noel's Situation," which finishes in vol. 2. The final chapter "The Blue Devil of Maghreb" starts in vol. 2 and finishes in vol. 4. In "The Flame of Magar," Florian was the coveted collateral for Noir's loan to Florian's mother (Higuri does have a sense of humor); a peeved Florian is bound by family honor to stay at Noir's side. In time, the contractual relationship between Noir and Florian warms into friendship as Florian experiences, little by little, Noir's genuine need and affection for him.

In "Petit Noel's Situation," we see a wonderfully tender, protective Florian comforting a troubled five-year-old. The wordless top panel in vol. 1, page 119, shows Florian looking very much like a young father lovingly watching his child sleep. A close-up strip focuses in on the tyke's hand securely grasping Florian's sleeve. The mood is deepened, the scene moves along without words. Later, this same gentle Florian stands up to Noir and even punches him when an unfeeling Noir tries to stop him from searching for the now missing child.

The action picks up in "The Blue Devil of Maghreb" with the introduction of the exotically sexy Azura, the ultimate villain of "Gorgeous Carat." Enter the Knights Templar who would like to see Azura dead for successfully breaking into their stronghold — but they have to stand in line behind Florian.

I used Minako's Japanese-to-English translation at www.senshigakuen.com/translations/manga/index.htm (though my own reading abilities in Japanese are not too bad). I liked her translation because she included panel action, sound effects, and historical notes. However, a major drawback is the translation does not indicate page breaks, except for vol. 4.

Asked about her translation, Minako said, "It is obviously a big mistake to decide to translate something you don't enjoy. You spend a great deal of time staring at pages in detail, pouring over every word used, inspecting the drawings for hints of emotion in body language, basically until you can't remember which articles mean what. Having said that, I still enjoyed every moment of **GC** and even reread it for fun. I find it amazing how well Higuri-sensei pulls off her historical fantasy genre works, blending fact and fiction so well that she almost inspires me to go on my own search for the Holy Grail (I'm speaking literally, oddly enough). One of the downsides, and joys, of translating **GC**

was the hours I would spend researching tidbits from France, Morocco, Russia, etc. Although it was frustrating to the point of tears at times, it truly awes me how much detail Higuri-sensei weaves into her stories. It truly takes you into the world of her own creation."

Bishie Watch

Like any good ladies' comic title, there are plenty of great-looking guys to drool over in ***Gorgeous Carat***.

1. Noir, a notorious jewel thief, a.k.a. Count Ray Balzac de Courland (Jp. "Rei Baruzakku do Kuururando"), distantly related to the higher-ranking Rocheforts. Has dark brown hair and green eyes. This bratty 18-year-old, former Sorbonne valedictorian is in the loan-sharking business.
2. Florian de Rochefort (Jp. "Furorean do Roshufooru"), bloodline closely related to the Bourbon monarchy (recall the ill-fated King Louis XVI and Queen Marie-Antoinette). Vulnerable, angelic, with platinum blond hair and violet eyes, the 20-year-old Florian is the type of guy you want to mother — or torture and destroy. Needless to say, he suffers a lot in ***GC***.
3. Azura, a.k.a. John Davis Romwell, Jr. One of the organizers of the Black Hand, a New York-based criminal organization. A childhood friend of Noir's. In ***GC***, the angel has amethyst eyes and the devil has piercing blue (that is, the one good eye). The regal, dark-skinned Azura has waist-length blue-tinged silver white hair and wears a patch over his right eye. In his headdress and flowing dark blue robe, he looks like a member of the nomadic Tuareg tribe (the famous "blue men" of the desert).
4. Solomon Sugar, a well-known private investigator, once associated with the Paris police department. Spiky blond hair and bespectacled, he has been

- chasing his "dear black cat" Noir for a long time and is determined to prove that the Count de Courland and Noir are the same person. Good husband material.
5. Viscount Michel Raoul de Courland, Noir's ostentatious look-alike cousin (but with blond hair). Michel is in the shipping business and likes girls (remember this is a boy's love comic).
 6. Noel Tassel, a cute sailor-suited 5-year-old boy, who is the son of the president of the Banque Tassel de Paris. He is never without his fluffy teddy bear.

High Mortality Rate Of Significant Women

As Cass points out in the "Fan Opinions" section below, at least You Higuri includes significant women characters in her stories, which is atypical for the boy's love genre. Nevertheless, they do suffer a high mortality rate.

1. (event) Florian's mother, Madame Rochefort, voluntarily dies in the collapse of Loire Castle where "The Flame of Magar," a jewel entrusted to the Rocheforts by the monarchy, was hidden. Her death is analogous to a captain going down with the ship.
2. (remembrance) Noel's mother passed away the previous year.
3. (event) Louise Mastroianni, a.k.a. Louise Tassel (Noel's stepmother) - the Italian boss for the Paris arm of the Black Hand, as well as Azura's father's mistress - dies from a point-blank gunshot in the face.
4. (flashback) Solomon's younger sister Julia was murdered by the Black Hand.
5. (flashback) Noir's French mother died of illness during his childhood, not long after his Arab father was killed during a power struggle for the position of tribal chieftain.

Laila, Noir's right-hand person, is a survivor, but then no

one views this boyish-looking Tunisian as a real woman. She even talks about herself in the third person a lot (more apparent in Japanese) as though she were not present, e.g., "Maybe Laila doesn't have that kind of feminine charm," she sighs after Florian confirms with her that Noir thinks of Laila as one of the guys rather than as a possible lover. Interestingly, Higuri projects a happy ending for Laila, one of the few **GC** characters capable of living happily ever after.

Artwork

You Higuri enjoys drawing costumes. In the Paris scenes, note the leg-of-mutton sleeves on some of the women's dresses. There is a historical period emphasis with high choker collars or jewelry for the women and bow ties, cravats, and ascots for the men. Men wear hats, such as fedoras, bowlers, soft billed caps, and derbys.

Turning toward the Arab world, You Higuri's pen was freer and looser to draw the sweeping lines of the headdresses and robes. In vol. 2, page 93, there is a strong textural contrast between the native dress of Azura's entertainers and the somewhat formal-looking daytime wear of Noir's group that makes them look stiffer and more ill-at-ease.

It is easy to skip over art that does not contribute directly toward the unfoldment of the textual narrative. The cover art sells the novel, the inside color art is a looked-for bonus, but you might miss other drawings until the art book comes out.

Several drawings from vol. 1 can be found in You Higuri's **Poison** art book, (c) 2000, published by Seishin-sha:

1. Inside color: Noir with top hat, cape, and whip. Florian leaping in behind him. Spacious staircase and lobby in

- the background. (Full uncut picture in ***Poison***.)
2. Vol. 1 heading (B&W single page): Seated Noir in Arabic dress. Western zodiac halo behind his head.
 3. Chapter 1 heading (B&W double page): Caped Noir with top hat in profile behind Florian. Florian with shirt unbuttoned wide wearing a gold necklace with green gems and wrapped in strings of pearls. His left hand tentatively touches his lips. (Color version in ***Poison***.)
 4. Back cover (color): Inset close-up of Noir with a cigar in his mouth and a red rose in his lapel.
 5. And included from vol. 3 is a B&W inset section divider of Noir and a B&W afterword close-up of Florian (full uncut picture in ***Poison***).

Review the B&W inset section dividers in vol. 3 because they are extraordinary compositions, more detailed than the ones you see in vol. 1 (vol. 2 repeats parts of larger panels; there are no section dividers in vol. 4). Additionally, the ***Gorgeous Carat Galaxy*** cover of Noir spattered in white paint with background color washes is novel in a fine arts way for a Higuri title.

There are two notable references in ***Gorgeous Carat*** to other artwork. The first is the painting of Louis XVI in Loire Castle (vol. 1, page 72). It is part of a full-length painting of the French king in his coronation robes by Joseph-Siffred Duplessis. The second reference is to Henri Matisse's "Moroccan Woman (Zorah Standing)," one of three of his model Zorah painted in 1912 (vol. 3, page 162).

Fan Opinions

Fiore (Singapore): "On ***Gorgeous Carat***, well, I love it. That's pretty obvious. Although Higuri-sensei is so stingy; can't Noir and Florian get into anything more 'serious'? (Teasers, I tell ya.) It's not sad and depressing like ***Cantarella***, but nevertheless very intriguing. Almost like a

solve-the-mystery kind of theme, especially the **Gorgeous Carat Galaxy** sequel. I wish Higuri-sensei will do more stories on them, like really the long-winded kind; **Galaxy** ends in one issue, even if the issue is sorta thicker than the average."

Lady of the Lake (California): "My opinion of **Gorgeous Carat** is that it is very well done. The art style is very good. My favorite character is Florian. Also, the story is very interesting; the circumstances of Florian's life are amusing. The setting is very beautiful, and the time period is also magnificent. It is such an interesting era."

Cass (Hong Kong): [on **Gorgeous Carat Galaxy**] "I have only been reading **GCG**'s scanlation, so I haven't read the end yet. Seems to move at a pretty good pace and the plot is complicated enough to keep me reading. As usual, such attention to details, and she can and gets to draw beautiful period costumes and backgrounds. This time around the mystery character at the center of all this is Eleonora, a young woman (she looks younger). So far, she is a sympathetic character. The point is that with most yaoi and boy's love stories, female characters are nonexistent, but in Higuri's work they exist and play a larger role, e.g., Lucrezia in **Cantarella**, Hilda in **Seimaden**.

Fan Opinions Continued

QUESTION: Is **Gorgeous Carat** better than Higuri's earlier series **Seimaden** (1994-1999)?

Zubyzu (Georgia; www.zubyzu.com; has **GCG translation on her site):** "I like it better than **Seimaden** because it moves a lot faster. The adventure in **GC** is almost nonstop. I think the characters are more handsome, also."

Team Bonet (New York;

www.geocities.com/gedojudea/carat/gorcarat.html):

"It's hard to say. *Seimaden* is a fantasy story, whereas *GC* is a historical/period story. Those are Higuri's best genres, though, in our honest opinion. She released several manga in between *Seimaden* and *GC* that, for us, simply weren't up to par: *Cutlass*, *Zeus*, etc. When *GC* was released, it was like a breath of fresh air. She was back in her element, so to speak. *GC* reminded us very much of one of her best manga, *Ludwig II* (and it continues her fascination with the wild, rougher, dark-haired fellow and the wispy, angelic seeming blond).

"We never got to read beyond vol. 2 of *GC*, so we can't say whether it steered clear of *Seimaden*'s great flaw, in our opinion: A rushed ending. After nine volumes, the 10th and last volume of *Seimaden* arrived to tie up loose ends like there was no tomorrow, and it was jarring and annoying. It felt as if Higuri had simply lost interest and churned out an ending just because. We can only hope the same didn't/won't happen to *GC*."

Anime Fan (Texas): "As for the series, I don't think I've ever run across that one. Or the *Seimaden*. Though both sound familiar. Isn't the *Carat* series the cute one with all those little chibi, neko-type characters? And *Seimaden* ... that sounds familiar as well, but I can't place it. What's it about?"

"Au Revoir" Note

This review of You Higuri's *Gorgeous Carat* is dedicated to all the new Higuri fans (hopefully "Anime Fan") and to the veterans who did the translations, wrote similar reviews, maintained the web sites, and contributed the opinions that made my job much easier.



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