

Of Pet Shops & Prison Revolts

Captives Plot a Jail Break

David Tighe

2023

a review of

Pets DC: Rise of the Pets by Ramon Dines and Kit Brixton. A.B.O. Comix, 2022

A.B.O. Comix describes themselves as “a collective of creators and activists who work to amplify the voices of LGBTQ prisoners through art. By working closely with prison abolitionist and queer advocacy organizations, we aim to keep queer prisoners connected to outside community and help them fight towards liberation.”

The money generated by the publishing goes towards the artists and writers directly, which is great because prisoners are always in need of money and resources.

This is the first A.B.O. Publication that I have seen, and it is impressive. *Pets DC* is a 175-page perfect bound graphic novel with a color cover and black and white comics inside. Ramon Dines provides nice illustrations to Kit Brixton’s story. Both authors are working behind prison walls, so the result isn’t slick looking, but who needs slick?

The setting of the comic is a pet shop in a strip mall like any other, but with the dystopian reality of strip malls dialed up a little. There is an ominous nuclear power plant in the background, bail bondsman next door, and razor-wire on the roof. No need for too much subtlety here: the pet store is a prison.

The action begins with the arrival of a new animal at the pet store: G.P., General Pop (a guinea pig), who is depicted on the cover in a brown military-style outfit, a black glove, green beret, with a black star on it. If you couldn’t decode the imagery—he’s the militant one.

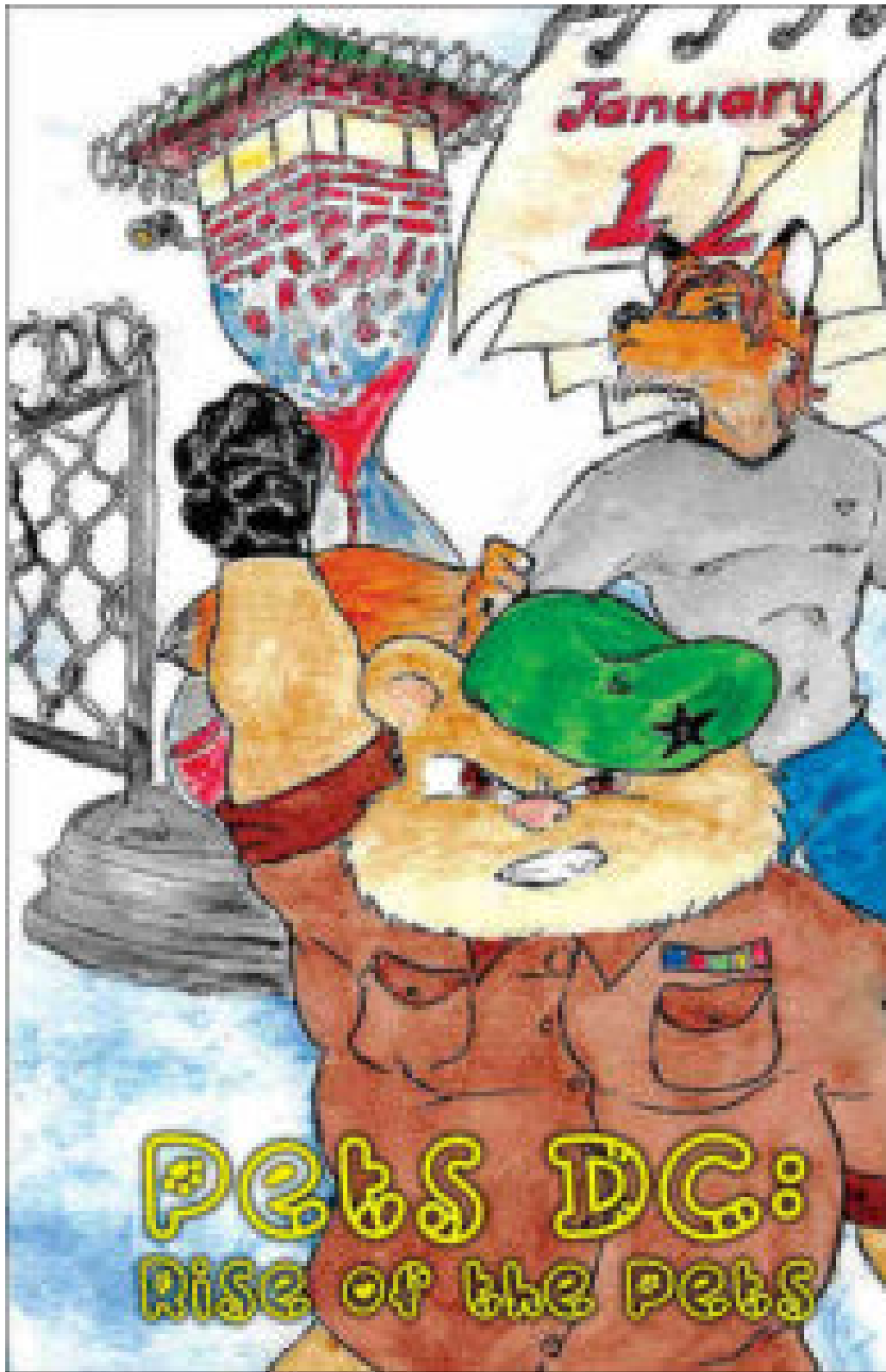
He meets Fred (a fox), perhaps a stand in for Brixton the author, who shows him around the shop. They meet an array of animals that draw upon prison archetypes (the jail house lawyer, the schemer who has several plans to get rich fast,) and presumably Brixton and Dines’s experiences as well.

G.P. preaches anarchism, soap boxes a lot (depicted as him literally standing on a soap box), rubs a lot of people the wrong way, but ultimately starts to get through to people. By the end of the second day, the animals in the shop have all (more-or-less) been won over to the cause, and they spend the third day planning the prison/pet store break.

Despite the serious subject matter, there is a lot of goofiness, puns and jokes. It is a comic about talking guinea pigs after all. Pop culture references abound: Akira, Fight Club, Pinky and the Brain, Finding Nemo, Snorks (an ‘80s cartoon), Smurfs, Dungeons & Dragons, Gil Scott Heron, Sponge Bob, Public Enemy, and probably more I’ve missed.

When they are getting close to breaking out, all the characters start wearing shirts like “Toussaint L’Ouverture 1804,” “Columbia University April 23, 1968,” “Kent State May 4, 1970,” “Mexico 1910,” “France 1789,” and “Russia 1917,” referring to various revolutions or insurrectionary moments. Not many specifically anarchist references on the shirts, despite G.P.’s apparent politics, but that’s ok.

There is also a pretty funny sub-plot/running joke about the rumor that guinea pigs are delicious. Several of the animals in the shop have been eyeing G.P. up as potential lunch. One of the snakes, for instance. It is later revealed that a human has been buying all the guinea pigs that come into the store, but not any wood chips, food or other



supplies. The implication is that he is eating the guinea pigs. In the artists afterwards, Dines talks about how he grew up eating guinea pigs in Ecuador and confirms the rumor—they are delicious!

One very humorous bit near the end is when the cop-loving, overnight security guard, after getting run over by the escaping animals, is arrested by cops who accuse him of releasing the animals. They then beat him down for resisting arrest.

One of the cops, who bears a striking resemblance to 1980s TV character, ALE, exclaims, “He must be one of those stinkin’ A. L. F. Types” (referring to the Animal Liberation Front). The security guard screams as he is being dragged out of the building, “I am not an eco-terrorist!” The animals escape to an ambiguous future. The end.

In his afterward, Kit Brixton refers to using art and writing to “push back on the existential dread & cynical pessimism of the prison experiences.” *Pets DC* is a hopeful fable with its roots in bitter experience, not naivete.

No real-life prison awaits the arrival of a lone, righteous, anarchist firebrand to unite the inmates who will outsmart and outmaneuver the Keystone Cop like guards in a generalized uprising / escape.

No real-world prison uprising has ever turned out so well or been so unambiguous. Any of us who dream of a better, less authoritarian world face a similar problem—how do we get from here to there? Part of the process must be to allow ourselves to dream, to envision a world worth living in.

There is a sort of dream logic to the narrative of *Pets DC* that really works for it. The book also states its goal clearly: No prisoners, no prisons (and by extension, no guards, no police, etc.). It is a work of fantasy, but points to the very real need for prisoner support and abolitionist activities on both sides of prison walls.

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