

Comic Relief

By Chuck Cleary

Why we love Abby Denson. The artist talks about her new book *Tough Love*



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Mix up a little art, a little drama, a lot of press, a local girl and a proud dad. What do you get? Abby Denson's acclaimed graphic novel *Tough Love: High School Confidential*. It's a little comic published last year that's been making a big splash, and Denson could not be more delighted.

Raised in West Hartford and now living in the Big Apple, Denson is the quintessential local girl hitting the big time. A book tour of the West Coast last summer, replete with enthusiastic reviews and loyal fans, has filled Denson with energy.

So what is all the fuss about? *Tough Love* is set in high school and follows a young gay boy, Brian, as he struggles with coming out, first love, homophobia and the daily angst of being a teenager. Drawn in black and white in an original style, but inspired by Japanese anime, *Tough Love* is arresting both visually and dramatically. The graphic novel has struck a chord, in part, because the experiences of Brian and his friends mirror so closely the emotions many young people experience.

A surprisingly layered novel, *Tough Love* interweaves several storylines. While it is a coming out story, it also expands beyond that to focus on how religion, homophobia and peer pressure influence and affect us. There's Chris, the object of Brian's affection and Julie, initially Brian's girlfriend who morphs into his best friend. Li, Chris's ex, struggles with religious parents, and Julie's own love drama proves that dating isn't any easier for straight people.

Tough Love started as one of many comics Denson had done for XY Magazine.

In addition to *Tough Love*, she also created "Jamie Starr Teen Drag Queen" and "Pop Secret." Inspired by underground comics, Denson wanted to create comics with a twist and a gay theme. Having been raised by a gay father, Ed Denson, Abby had first-hand experience with gay issues. Her mother, father and her father's partner have been very proud of her and supportive of her book.

"Abby has always been an activist for gay issues even from her earliest days in high school. My partner Paul and I are very proud of her achievements, her positive attitude, and her social consciousness," said Ed Denson, a longtime West Hartford resident.

Denson wanted to create a realistic and interesting story with a little bit of soap opera. Explaining the religious element, Denson says, "Christianity has been used to instill homophobia—to cause fear, putting children at risk. Mothers won't

talk to daughters about birth control and other important issues." Feedback has shown Denson just how much *Tough Love* has resonated with teens. Letters and emails have revealed a number of LGBT youth who say the book has supported them when they have felt alone and isolated.

The art of Keith Haring and Japanese anime inspired the look of *Tough Love*. Denson prefers simple, iconographic art. Internally, the comic has somewhat of a retro look, characters have records and record players rather than ipods, and posters hanging on bedroom walls are of bands Denson liked when she was younger.

A graduate of Parsons School of Design, Denson has worked in the field of graphic novels and comics for quite a while. Besides original creations like "Dolltopia," she's written for "Powerpuff Girls," "Scooby Doo," "The Simpsons," "Sabrina the Teenage Witch" and others. A true artist exploring multiple genres, Denson has been an active musician in punk bands for many years. Her current band is called The Saturday Night Things.

Denson's friend and colleague, Tim Fish, is also an acclaimed graphic novelist. A resident of Boston, Fish is a prolific artist best known for his "Cavalcade of Boys" series that amusingly and accurately depicts the drama of gay life. Denson recommends Fish's graphic novels for their fun storylines and detailed graphics.

Abby Denson and Tim Fish will appear at Tunxis Community College's in Farmington for the Third Annual Writers Festival on Wednesday April 18th. A book signing will follow.

"Paul, Abby's mom and I couldn't hope for a more supportive daughter. I'm overjoyed that she's been able to work in a field that she's passionate about, and that she's been able to publish her first full-length graphic novel," said Denson's father.

Tough Love is on sale in bookstores everywhere. To learn more about Abby, visit her at www.abbycomix.com or at her MySpace page www.myspace.com/abbycomix. To learn more about Tim Fish visit www.timfishworks.com.

For more information about Denson and Fish's appearance at the Third Annual Writers Festival, or for a complete schedule of events, contact ccleary@txcc.commnet.edu.