

PAUL GRAVETT

COMICS ■ GRAPHIC NOVELS ■ MANGA

PG Previews:

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The House That Groaned

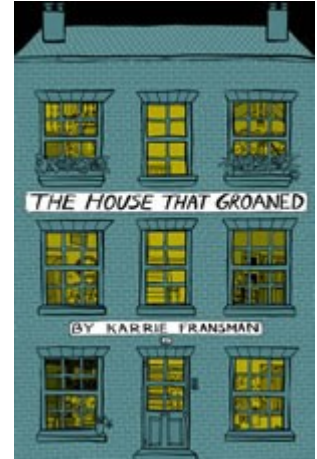
by **Karrie Fransman**

SquarePeg

£14.99

Paul Gravett says:

The location of this ensemble piece has a telltale address, of course: Rottin Road, reminiscent of the famous Glasgow street Rottenrow, and suggesting something rotten and rotting, in decline and decay, like some modern *House of Usher*. From the outside, street after street, these rows and rows of apartment buildings all look the same. But what lies behind their doors, beneath the surface? Beneath outward appearances and the veneer of normality? Like the skin of a body peeled away to reveal its inner workings, this graphic novel's cover image shows us first the brick-built, three-storey exterior of 141 Rottin Road. We then notice that the windows to its six flats and the central door and stairwells have each pane of glass cut out, to let us peep like nosy neighbours through them into yellow-illuminated interiors. These are revealed in full only once we open the cover - I can think of few other more clever cover designs to lure the reader to enquire within! Also revealed inside are the building's structural skeleton, its hidden construction materials, roof joists, the plumbing and gas pipes, the tangled electrical wires, the building as a body in itself. It's not the last time that we will see through its walls and floors. It's no coincidence that another of Karrie Fransman's comics, shown at the Comica 2010 Festival exhibition *That's Novel!* I curated at the London Print Studio, consisted of her own childhood dolls house, which she gutted and redecorated to narrate a creepy story, which could be read by looking into its windows from room to room.



Returning to *The House That Groaned*, there are also those bodies within its walls and their relationships to their own bodies, and to those of others around them. Across six chapters, we discover the other tenants in the company of newcomer Barbara as she tries to settle in. Periodically, Fransman cuts from this present-day narrative to flashbacks of formative moments from her sextet's pasts, deepening our understanding and perhaps empathy for them. There are some arresting surprises along the way, sometimes macabre, sometimes shocking, usually saved for left-hand whole pages to catch us unawares. Karrie Fransman's dual background as a psychology and sociology student and a creative advertiser helps underpin her skills at both characterisation and communication. She has a quirky, lively cartooning style to which you can soon adjust, for instance, the way she gives all her characters doll-like circles on their cheeks and usually large V-shaped noses. She is also adept at lettering design, filling the speech balloons of the *Midnight Feast* maven's tempting phone calls with big, bold, luscious calligraphy that threatens to burst their seams. Later, these beckoning words coil around her, pulling her out of bed.

By the melodramatic finale, there is tragedy here, scars that miss their chance to heal, and yet in the face of tragedy, there is grotesque comedy too. Fransman even gives us a kind of walking-into-the-sunset happy ending for two of the tenants, and a quietly touching demise of another, bleeding and blending back into the landscape she loved when she was younger and into the ground where her husband lies buried. *The House That Groaned* is steeped in physical obsessions and psychological damages, and suggests that a powerful enough trauma, during childhood or perhaps later, can re-shape someone's sense of themselves fundamentally, though with luck not always irrevocably. Oddly macabre and moving at the same time, more absurdist magic realism than gritty kitchen-sink drama, few British debut graphic novels have been as audacious and unsettling as this.