

# “Is This Truly the Only Earth I Can Live On?”



Adam Jones

## GET YOUR WAR ON

David Rees

Introduction by Colson Whitehead

Soft Skull Press

<http://www.softskull.com>

100 pages; paper, \$11.00

On October 9, 2001, David Rees, a Manhattan office temp, made some installments of a comic strip and posted them at his Web site. Maybe a coworker forwarded you the URL (<http://www.mnftiu.cc>) one morning. Maybe you've read about it at Salon.com or Slashdot, or even in *Newsweek* or *Rolling Stone*; the comic caught on.

Last summer, Rees collected many of the strips in a self-financed, signed and numbered, 1,000-copy edition. He donated the proceeds, through Adopt-A-Minefield, to Mine Detection and Dog Center Team #5 in western Afghanistan. Then, one year after he first posted *Get Your War On* (and one year to the day after the US began bombing Afghanistan), Soft Skull Press reissued the book with extra comics and an introduction by novelist Colson Whitehead. Rees is again donating his profits to the demining team (Soft Skull is also donating a percentage of the sales).

The format of the *Get Your War On* strips is similar to Rees's previous comics, *My New Fighting Technique Is Unstoppable* and *My New Filing Technique Is Unstoppable* (both available at his Web site): pairs and trios of clip-art characters express their rage through profane but powerless verbal exchanges. *Fighting's* determined martial artists bicker in the jargon of fanboy kung-fu enthusiasts; *Filing's* temps and contractors argue with meaningless tech-speak. The *GYWO* characters (PC-friendly office drones on loan from *Filing*) share their anger and confusion and fears in the new vocabulary furnished by The War on Terror and Its Aftermath (which in Rees's realm includes not only Enron and Anthrax and Exxon but a sudden guest appearance by the 1980s cartoon robot Voltron).

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In strip after strip, the characters phone one another from their cubicles or linger over coffee and a circle that's either a bagel or a donut, struggling to say something that doesn't amount to horrified resignation. Rees crops, flips, and redraws his stock images to provide close-ups and to build brief narratives (one character suddenly gains weight, another starts pulling her hair out), creating empathy with his office workers while maintaining (in the manner of Max Cannon's *Red Meat* and David Lynch's *The Angriest Dog in the World*) the sensation that these people are trapped, their rebellions limited to binge drinking, binge eating, masturbation, and, of course, excessive swearing. Although strip after strip demonstrates

the inadequacy of italics, all-caps, and exclamation points to capture how fucked up our world recently seems to have become (but has always been), the characters cannot move past swearing and speculation on whether they would suicide-bomb themselves to take out Osama bin Laden, or wondering how many bombs the US will need “to bring peace and justice to Earthlings.” (The reply: “Oh come on, we both know how many fucking bombs it'll take—all of the fucking bombs we can make!”) The message is, I think, clear: we know these characters; they are us. (Rees supposedly modeled the first comic on a phone conversation with a friend.) Sure, September 11th changed the world forever. Sure, none of us knows what will happen next. But, sure, we've seen this all before, in kind if not degree. And, sure, we all know where this is going. So how many strips will Rees have to make before the reader gets something on about it?

On a basic level, *GYWO* satisfies in a way familiar through the tradition of dissident collage: it marries images committee-calculated not to offend with a politically marginalized attitude and hundreds of swear words to breed something startling and potentially offensive and terribly funny in an “oh shit we might (and someone poorer and weaker and just as innocent *will*) die” kind of way. But what Rees is so good at pointing out, and what has resonated with readers, I think, is how the officially sanctioned venues for grieving and revenging simply don't suffice for a great many people:

Hey, are you on CNN.com? They've got a really interesting poll; they ask “Is al-Qaeda sending coded messages to followers via video statements?” You can answer “Yes” or “No!”

What about “How the fuck would I know?” Who's qualified to answer a goddamn poll about *coded video statements*? Any American who bothers answering that poll probably masturbates to Tom Clancy novels!

Wow! 100,000 responses!

It's a criticism Rees levels not only at the media but at proponents of the Axis of Evil and unlimited wars with Iraq and North Korea: “Oh my God, this War On Terrorism is gonna *rule!* I can't wait until the war is over and there's no more terrorism!” The audience, too, is surely indicted: Why has so much of our government's response to the horrors of September 11th been political and economic opportunism? And, more damning, why have we as a people fallen for it? In the final panel of the final cartoon, an anonymous character wonders, “Is this truly the only Earth I can live on?” The clip-art employees living in *Get Your War On* have no answer except “Yes.” David Rees has cleverly reminded us readers that we may have at least one other option.

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