



The Cardboard Kingdom

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Welcome to a neighborhood of kids who transform ordinary boxes into colorful costumes, and their ordinary block into cardboard kingdom. This is the summer when sixteen kids encounter knights and rogues, robots and monsters--and their own inner demons--on one last quest before school starts again.

In the Cardboard Kingdom, you can be anything you want to be--imagine that!

The Cardboard Kingdom Details

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From Reader Review The Cardboard Kingdom for online ebook

Ari says

Okay, so I've been a fan of Chad Sell's art for quite some time now, as I think most drag fans online probably are! And because I'm a fan of his art, and because I love to support queer artists whenever and however I can, I signed up to support Chad on Patreon towards the end of 2017, which has been one fantastic investment! I genuinely look forward every month to getting that envelope in the mail with my postcard sketches and prints, and even just interacting with Chad when I make my monthly custom sketch request is always a pleasure! So of course as soon as I could I put in my preorder for The Cardboard Kingdom, and excitedly awaited its release date.

I am so happy to say that The Cardboard Kingdom did not disappoint! It was adorable and fun and interesting and sweet, and I loved every bit of it. At face value it might seem like just another children's book about kids having fun in the summer, dressing up and fighting imaginary monsters, what have you. But really, it's so much more than that.

Before I get into anything else, I would just like to say that the art in The Cardboard Kingdom was phenomenal. This was expected, of course, but somehow it still managed to blow me away, despite my high expectations! Each character was unique, down to the little details, and each page made me want to spend a while taking it all in. As someone who can barely put together a stick figure and whose artistic abilities are definitely more of the written variety, I'm always amazed (and so inspired!) by what visual artists can do!

Now, to the story. I looked over The Cardboard Kingdom's reviews on Amazon before typing up my own, and noticed a common theme: the reviewers' children loved it. And yeah, it's maybe technically a kids' book. But here I am, 25 years old, writing a rave review for this kids' book, and hoping I might inspire other adults to read it as well. While, yes, the story focuses on children having fun in the last days before summer break ends and school picks back up, the themes held within the pages are themes that anyone can relate to, no matter their age. Chad Sell himself actually said to me (in a comment on Instagram, when I posted about how much I was loving the book so far, despite it being "for" younger readers), "One of my great hopes is that the book is relatable and emotional for just about every reader". And while, yes, I am just one adult reader, if you ask me, I think this book definitely accomplishes that goal.

With such a varied cast of characters, kids of all shapes and sizes and backgrounds and personalities, there's something in The Cardboard Kingdom for just about anyone. For kids, this is incredible because, put simply, representation matters. For a child to open up a book and see a character who looks like them, or who goes through the same struggles as them? That can be life-changing, and I'm not using hyperbole when I say that. What I wouldn't give to have had such a book when I was a kid.

Since it's pride month, something that's been weighing heavy in my mind lately is the fact that so many people have these fun little stories of moments in childhood or adolescence when they realized they were - insert LGBTQIA+ identity here-. It's painful to see all those fun stories and realize that you don't have one of your own, because instead, you spent most of your life trying to repress those feelings, telling yourself you were wrong for having them because that's what you were taught to believe, and trying to "make yourself" be straight. In hindsight I can look back on moments and realize just how queer I really was when I was younger, and it's bittersweet to think of how differently things might have turned out had my environment been different.

And that's where books like The Cardboard Kingdom come in. If younger me had read this book (and younger me loved to read- she would've adored this book even just at face value, never mind the deeper meaning!), she would've seen herself in so many of the pages. She would've seen herself in The Huntress, an adoring older sister to a younger brother. She would've seen herself in The Big Banshee, a girl who's always just a little "too loud", or a little "too much". She would've seen herself in The Animal Queen with her adoration for all creatures, in The Blob for her "weird" ideas that no one else ever really seemed to get, in Professor Everything for her intelligence and difficulty making friends. Hell, younger me would've even seen herself in The Bully in some ways. And I really do think, with all that, that younger me would have felt a little less alone.

Instead, I read The Cardboard Kingdom as an adult seeing younger me in all those characters, and I can't deny that there were tears shed throughout the book as a result. When life gets rough (as it is frequently wont to do in adulthood), it can be so good and refreshing, once in a while, to just... take a break. Lay in bed and watch cartoons or kids' movies for a while. Color in a coloring book. Eat a Popsicle and put together a puzzle. Or pick up a book about kids having fun in the summer and simply escape.

I'd absolutely recommend picking up The Cardboard Kingdom for any children in your life, and/or for yourself.

DaNae says

One on hand this book is crammed full of eye-opening themes; on the other hand it shows, one summer, one neighborhood and whole passel of kids rushing out each day to expand on their self-created utopia.

Brittany says

This book just about made me cry! This is such a sweet, entertaining story that so many kids will enjoy - and the message of inclusiveness and being yourself is well-developed and age-appropriate without being preachy. A lot of fun!

Gabrielle Schwabauer says

Was it a little predictable? Yeah. Was it a little contrived? Sure. Did it warm my cold, dead heart? Absolutely.

Such a fun, clever idea, and the art backs it up all the way. I wish someone had given me this book when I was 8.

Jordan Henrichs says

My two oldest kids (ages 8 and 6), recently transformed a refrigerator box into a lemonade stand, then into a castle, then into tent and it lasted longer than many of their toys we purchase for them. The Cardboard

Kingdom has a fun sense of nostalgia in that way because in case anyone is wondering if kids really do play with cardboard, they do! The Cardboard Kingdom is cute and colorful and I love the themes of creativity and inclusion. I like that each writer focused on a different character because this allowed each character's personality to really be maximized despite limited page time for each.

For some reason, I had a difficult time following what was going on in some of the stories due to lack of text and layout of panels. There's a degree of this in all graphic novels but I felt like I had to work harder with this one.

I love the hopeful note the book ends on, with all of the neighborhood kids invading school together, especially because the cardboard and creativity will be set aside in a year for iPhones and social media accounts.

Leonard Kim says

9/1/18: on revisiting this, I take back the 4-4.5 thing. 5 stars all the way and one of the best books of the year.

Objectively maybe 4-4.5 stars, but this gets the bump, because 1) the emotions are 5 stars, and 2) so many collaborative projects don't live up to hopes, but this, this is how you do it.

Kari says

I will say that I found myself a little bit confused a few times but it was still a wonderful read.

Kristen Thorp says

So. Damn. Great.

Lesley Burnap says

Fell in love with this amazing group of creative, clever kids...all just wanting a place to fit in! Due to some sensitive pieces (separated parents fight, the word "hellion" used by a grandparent to describe her granddaughter), I would recommend for grades 3+, unless you know your reader well. I love that a boy can be a sorceress and a girl can be a big, green banshee. Dream on kids, dream on.

Julie Kirchner says

I liked that the content of this graphic novel could be enjoyed by younger readers, however, I'm not sure they would necessarily understand all that is going on in the story. So many inferences they would need to make! I enjoyed the book and the creativity it could bring out in kids who read it. I know our house has fun

whenever there are good cardboard boxes sitting around!

Betsy says

The other day I listened to a very interesting speaker as she defined in crystal clear terms the words “equality” and “equity”. Simply put, “equality” is leveling the playing field and “equity” is getting the same end results. And, as with all things, I turn to the world of children’s literature to see how this applies to the books we’re handing kids. We’re seeing a small increase in the number of books for children that feature groups that have been historically pushed to the side and/or ignored entirely in literature. And, inevitably, since we’re dealing with literature for children, a lot of that stuff is heavy-handed, didactic, and clunky with its messaging. Or, far far worse, not fun. There is no way to turn a child off a message faster than boring them to death with it. Do that and not only do you fail to instill in them any sense of the world in which we live, but you could turn them off of reading as well. How to face this foe? Enter comics to save the day! Specifically, enter *The Cardboard Kingdom*. You want inclusion? You want diversity? You want positive messages so wrapped up in a bubble of colorful high-octane fun that you swallow the whole pill with glee and beg for more? Chad Sell and his cadre of clever writers are here and they might just be the wave of the future we’ve been waiting for.

Consider the cardboard box. Easily accessible. Available. The perfect tool of children everywhere. Consider its applications. With a cardboard box you can cut and reform it into anything. The headdress of an evil enchanter. The enchanted sword of a knight. A monster. A dragon. The possibilities are endless. In a suburban neighborhood, a large group of children have created a whole other world. They can be anyone they want to be. The boy with a violent father becomes a nighttime vigilante, protecting his home. The girl with a big voice becomes a she-hulk of epic proportions. The boy in desperate need of becoming someone powerful and awesome transforms into a gorgeous sorceress. There are robots, scribes, mad scientists, beasts, anything you want to be is possible. Every home has its challenges. Even a world as beautiful as this has to deal with bullies. But in this little cardboard kingdom, every kid belongs. Particularly the ones reading this book.

When I was a kid I read a lot of old *Doonesbury* comic strip collections. And sure, I didn’t get a lot out of the sections involving the White House, but when it came to a group of friends living together in a commune, I was entranced. For me, this represented a kind of idealized world. Lots of friends living with you all the time, each person with their own particular quirks and kicks. I got a very similar feeling when I read *The Cardboard Kingdom* except instead of a 1970s commune, we’re dealing with an extended neighborhood filled to brimming with kids who are all approximately the same age. Even without the inclusion and diversity on show here (and it is present and accounted for), that is already an idealized situation. Because Sell’s art is so enticing, it would be easy to attribute this book’s success (no question, it will be successful) on just the art and the writing. Less obvious, but just as important, is the world it creates. Where kids create quests for other kids, cardboard is a substance that can pretty much be turned into anything, and no two children ever want to play the same character. Expect this book to be read, reread, re-re-read, and delved into on a pretty regular basis.

On a preliminary read I found myself puzzled by something I discovered at the beginning of each section. Chad Sell’s name is featured prominently on the cover of this book and is mentioned with each mini story inside. Yet there was often another name listed next to his. Why? Turns out, this book was co-written, after a fashion, with ten other people. That, in and of itself, isn’t too surprising. Such collaborations have happened before. The tone of the book stays the same throughout too. At first I thought this was because all eleven

people aligned their writing styles to make the book the best possible product. Later I discovered it had more to do with the fact that Sell is the driving force behind the project and the other writers are helping him mold and shape the characters. Character is key in this book, and for good reason. More than anything else, *The Cardboard Kingdom* is a short story collection ala Ray Bradbury's fellow ode to kids in the summer Dandelion Wine. Coming up with tales as consistently good as this (I can honestly say there's not a weak one in the bunch) is no mean feat. Now to be fair, because you have so many different writers, there are some interesting tropes that perhaps would have been avoided if there had been a single author. For example, moms are almost universally understanding in this book. Dads and grandparents? Significantly less so, though I think it's fair to say that with the possible exception of Seth's dad, no grown-up is beyond hope (and even he knows when he's beat).

But what's going to draw kids in is the art. Chad Sell has this accessible style that's inevitably going to be compared to Raina Telgemeier, what with its clean lines and bold colors (not sure who did the coloring on this book, but they should get extra points since they're doing about 50% of the heavy lifting visually). You immediately grasp the internal logic of cardboard that can be turned into pretty much anything. This magical substance is without limit in Sell's world, and we buy in completely. Couple that with the imaginative sequences. If you like the kids then you'll LOVE their alter egos (particularly that sassy Sorceress with the hips that just won't stop). But getting beyond the glitz and glamour, the real lure here is Sell's artistry as a storyteller. You need only look at his wordless sequences (and there are a LOT packed in here). Sometimes a story with dialogue will turn into a tale without a word and the transition is seamless. "The Big Banshee" is a great example of this. When Sophie is sad, all words disappear. Sell even silently shows the grandmother that silenced her, taming down her magnificent hair, an act that speaks volumes without a single syllable. None of this would have worked without Sell putting his heart and soul into each storyline.

As with any anthology, it's not like the book is flawless. That skill with wordless sequences I just lauded so highly does occasionally lead to confusion. The opening story with The Sorceress is a good example of this. It's not essential, but it's a pretty big point that The Sorceress is brought to life by a boy. This might partially account for why he's so initially shocked and frightened when discovered by his neighbor. However, at that point in the book it's easy to assume he's a girl with short hair. To Sell's credit this is quickly corrected in the second storyline, but it does speak to the problems that inevitably come up when you eschew words. Confusion is inevitable, but by no means a deal breaker.

There has never been a time when there has been as much widespread acceptance (or, at the very least, tolerance) of dressing up as your favorite creature or character. Walk into any comic convention and instantly you're in a space where people feel safe to live out their fantasies in as flamboyant a fashion as possible. Of course, they learn from the best. Kids are the true geniuses when it comes to full immersion into an alternate world. And children's literature has always been in love with those kids that could wholly give into those imaginings. Everything from Bridge to Terabithia by Katherine Paterson to Doll Bones by Holly Black. And now that comics for kids have gained widespread acceptance, we're taking that to the next logical level. We can see their imaginings and get just as wrapped up in their storylines as they do. Costumes are, naturally, just a nice bonus. So is the fact that for many *The Cardboard Kingdom* has the potential to become the norm. Imagine that.

For ages 9-12.

Renata says

This is super sweet, fun, and funny. A great middle-grade GN for all kinds of kids, with bright, fun art. Definitely one to hand to your fans of Smile and the like.

Laura Harrison says

One of the top middle grade graphic novels of 2018. Truly special.

Diz says

This book shows how children can deal with difficult circumstances through the use of fantasy and role play. Some of the issues that the children deal with are divorce, bullying, gender identity, the inability to make friends. Reading these stories really makes you realize that fantasy and play can have a strong positive emotional impact on children.

Skye Kilaen says

A lovely, diverse, queer-friendly series of loosely interconnected short comic stories about kids in a neighborhood and how they meet and build friendships through imaginary play. It's fun, it's silly, it also tackles some serious topics with great compassion, and I was really impressed. The dress-up cover of this graphic novel fooled me into thinking it was for the younger set, maybe preschool age? I think it's more lower/upper elementary, though as an adult reader, I found it pretty enchanting.

The cast is quite large, but introducing characters incrementally works fabulously here. I've never seen a collaborative project like this hang together so well, visually and tonally, and it's wonderful. If the kiddo in your life is into imagination, especially fantasy and magic, this is a great pick.
