

★ **Mendel the Mess-Up****Terry LaBan**

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A boy in a village plagued by Cossack soldiers battles a curse to help his family and friends in the excellent graphic novel *Mendel the Mess-Up*.

Mendel, who is approaching his bar mitzvah, lives in a remote Jewish village, Lintvint, where the main economic product is kvatch, a drink made from goat sweat. Although Mendel tries to help out, he always seems to make situations worse: A curse cast on him before he was born causes his best intentions to backfire. When the Cossacks invade, Mendel's mistake leads them right to the village. After a crisis of self-confidence, Mendel uses daring, perseverance, and ingenuity to send the Cossacks back where they came from and save his village.

Mendel's village is based on early twentieth-century shtetls, but his home is in a fictional country, Nahsovia, cushioning audiences somewhat from the tragedies that accompanied Cossack raids. Its approach is also comedic thanks to Mendel, who is savvy and appealing as he doubts his abilities and still nurtures his indomitable spirit.

The artwork is a tour de force of cartooning, evincing a keen eye for period details. It uses heavy black lines and a wide color palette and has a penchant for exaggeration, combining the styles of punchy comic strips and longer narrative comic books. The pages demonstrate casual mastery of techniques like sweat drops pouring off of nervous characters, "stink lines" wafting from the source of a bad odor, and other classic emanata.

Balancing action, suspense, and humor, the wonder-filled graphic novel *Mendel the Mess-Up* is about a boy who faces danger in order to save his family and friends.

PETER DABBENE (January / February 2025)

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