

Kabuki

The Complete Series

[Kabuki: Circle of Blood \(1\)](#)

[Kabuki: Dreams \(2\)](#)

[Kabuki: Masks of Noh \(3\)](#)

[Kabuki: Skin Deep \(4\)](#)

[Kabuki: Metamorphosis \(5\)](#)

[Kabuki: Scarab \(6\)](#)

all reviews by [alison](#)

[back to top](#)

Kabuki: Circle of Blood (1)

ISBN: 1887279806

By David Mack

Image Comics 2001

Kyoto, Japan: the calm of a rainy night in the not-too-distant future is punctuated by a brutal murder inside one of the city's most notorious nightclubs. As the words Target:Confirmed:Terminate play across our vision, a masked figure carrying two sickle-shaped knives leaves the area. The scene is set.

As the curtains rise on Act 2, agent Kabuki has sheathed her curved knives and returned to the headquarters of The Noh, the Japanese government's best-kept secret and the only effective crime fighting organization in the city. Surrounded by the Noh's other seven operatives (all masked women adept at armed and unarmed combat) she learns that crime lord Ryuichi Kai has returned to Kyoto. The Noh is assigned to take out Kai's potential collaborators before he can regain his grip on the city. This should be an easy job for a woman of almost superhuman physical and mental ability, but Kabuki knows that for her there will be more to this task than the simple killings she is used to. As she battles with a past full of dark memories, Kabuki is poised to reveal the Noh's corrupt power structure, a moment that will force her to let go of everything that links her to her past and identity.

David Mack's stark black and white drawings range from rough pencil sketches to images that look like woodcuts are interspersed with abstract backgrounds, textured lines, and drops and splashes of ink. **Circle of Blood** was first published as Mack's college thesis after four years of studying Japanese, theater, anatomy, and mythology. In my opinion Mack's artwork is still ahead of his writing in terms of flow and coherence at this stage, but sticking with the story as the foundations of Kabuki's psychological struggle and personal iconography are laid is well worth it. Not being an expert, I can't comment on the accuracy of Mack's portrayal of Japanese history and culture - readers will have to draw their own conclusions.

[back to top](#)

Kabuki: Dreams (2)

ISBN: 1582402779

By David Mack

Image Comics 2001

Part near-death experience, part spiritual awakening, **Dreams** opens with Kabuki lying mortally wounded on her mother's grave. Wandering in and out of consciousness, Kabuki travels mentally from her childhood to the present and briefly leaves her body for a rendez-vous with her mother's spirit. **Dreams** takes place in the space of only a few hours, but Kabuki is outside of time, travelling into the past and into possible futures. Mack's language is sparse in this volume, as words become collage elements rhyming, spinning, and sometimes vanishing entirely into images. This is the first color volume of the Kabuki series, and also the first pages that Mack created with paints and collage rather than pen and ink. That he is a virtuoso in the medium is immediately obvious. Each page appears three-dimensional, combining elements of traditional Japanese artwork with medical charts, pencil and watercolor sketches, monoprints, and photography. The introspective and surrealistic plot of **Dreams** is also something new for Mack, but this feels like a natural extension of the storytelling in **Circle of Blood**. Kabuki's battles in this volume are not with physical enemies, but with her own past, her memories, and her sense of self. **Dreams** is both a coda to the bloody action of the previous volume, and an important introduction for the next installment of the story of the Noh. As an added bonus, **Dreams** features an amusing "I knew him when"-style introduction by Brian Michael Bendis, creator of [Fortune and Glory](#) and **Powers**.

[back to top](#)

Kabuki: Masks of the Noh (3)

ISBN: 158240108X

By David Mack, Rick Mays, Michael Avon Oeming

Image Comics 1998

Kabuki has vanished without a trace, leaving a path of destruction in her wake. The remaining seven Noh agents are assigned to track her down and return to Tokyo with her or with positive evidence of her death. Scarab, Snapdragon, Siamese, Butoh, Ice, and Tiger Lily are all ruthless killers, but with Kabuki fled and the Noh administration in disarray, each woman in her own way begins to question her identity and her place in the world. **Masks of the Noh** offers us a glimpse into the daytime life of Siamese, conjoined sisters surgically separated and fitted with super-b bionic arms. Although they are now physically separate, Siamese still finish each other's sentences, share a single name, and apparently communicate without speaking: an interesting portrait of the left and right sides of the brain. In another part of town, Tiger Lily meets up with Scarab after a brutal beating and both women realize that they have never met without their masks on before. Interestingly, Scarab is a comic book writer and illustrator who uses her pens and ink to expunge feelings of guilt, fear, and uncertainty before and after a job for the Noh. This kind of vignette gives us a glimpse into the private lives of women who have so far been portrayed as invulnerable and devoid of emotion, adding significantly to the story's impact. At the end of these short stories, all of Mack's characters are fully human, albeit still inhumanly powerful, agile, and intelligent. **Masks of the Noh** is co-authored by a star-studded cast of illustrators including Rick Mays and Michael Oeming. All these drawing styles blend seamlessly, but each story presents a subtly different take on black ink, white spaces, and the setting of a scene.

[back to top](#)

Kabuki: Skin Deep (4)

ISBN: 1582401500

By David Mack

Kabuki: Skin Deep (4)

ISBN: 1582401500

By David Mack

Image Comics 2000

Kabuki opens her eyes as a brief blast of radio static from the Noh's communication devices falls silent. Scarred, weakened, and isolated in stark and unfamiliar surroundings, her knowledge of the passage of time slips away. Kabuki has been taken into protective custody by Control Corps, the country's most powerful secret intelligence service, and is now under close observation in a psychiatric ward. Without her mask and weapons, Kabuki must struggle to make sense of her life and her past under the microscope-like gaze of hospital orderlies and psychologists. Kabuki begins to connect to the world outside her own memories through secret communication with a fellow inmate, and soon discovers that the key to escape from the hospital may lie in her newfound ability to balance on the line between past and present, sanity and insanity.

Skin Deep is the second color volume of the Kabuki series, picking up stylistically right where **Dreams** left off, with a plot that provides Mack's best balance so far between fractured introspection and explosive superhero-style action. In the afterword to Volume 5, John Sayles describes Mack's repetitive use of images and textual themes as the creation of a new language loosely based on pictograms and associations. This symbolic alphabet, mirroring the kanji characters that scar Kabuki's face, begins to come into play in **Skin Deep**, providing readers with a code to interpret double meanings behind the printed words on each page.

[back to top](#)

Kabuki: Metamorphosis (5)

ISBN: 1582402035

By David Mack

Image Comics 2000

Still trapped within the windowless maze of the Control Corps psychiatric facility, Kabuki fights her inner demons and learns to resist the hospital's insidious attempts to control her. We get to meet some of Kabuki's fellow inmates as this episode unfolds: MC Square, a math genius who is convinced that she's found the secret to time travel; an ex-psychologist driven insane by a former patient; and Buddha reincarnated in the body of a psychic ex-government agent. **Metamorphosis** unfolds around a detailed portrait of Kabuki's mysterious new friend Akemi, a creative thinker obsessed by paper, words, and sculpture. As these variously insane women work together to free Kabuki from her nightmarish captivity Kabuki herself is forced to come to terms with her own image of herself. Through paintings, Rorschach tests, secret communications, dreams, and hallucinations Kabuki is beginning to piece together a new identity for herself, casting off her association with the Noh and her quest for revenge.

For me, the Kabuki series just gets better from one volume to the next, reaching a graphic and textual pinnacle with **Metamorphosis**. It is fascinating to chart Mack's development as a writer and an artist from the elegantly simple style and elliptical plot of **Circle of Blood** to the poetic revelations and layered imagery of Volumes 4 and 5. Technical elements such as pacing and continuity are handled more skillfully by now as well, making **Metamorphosis** a satisfying and intriguing read. It is hard to avoid hyperbole when describing the artwork in this volume: Mack's command of his many mediums is awe-inspiring. Commentaries by Bill Sienkiewicz and John Sayles act as bookends for the story, providing the best

Kabuki: Scarab (6)

ISBN:

By David Mack

Image Comics

Bandaged, exhausted, and scarred mentally as well as physically, Keiko is taken from prison by an agent of the Noh and "reassembled" into "Scarab" a woman with no friends, no lover, no past, and no clear future beyond revenge against the Yakuza underground. From street punk to deadly assassin, **Lost in Translation** details how the Noh finds and molds its new agents into the masked killing machines we know from **Kabuki** volumes 1-5. In a series of flashbacks Scarab recounts her past to fellow Noh operative Tigerlily: running away from an orphanage, living a wild life in Tokyo's back alleys, getting mixed up with some business for the Yakuza... and finally losing everything in a spray of bullets and broken glass.

Chronologically, **Lost in Translation** takes place at the same time as Kabuki Volumes 3 and 5. As Kabuki languishes in a Control Corps hospital and the Noh agents set out to track her down, Scarab and Tigerlily snatch an evening alone together to recapture their past lives before risking everything to kill one of their own. Scarab traces a series of repeated images and symbols throughout her life, seeking to reconstruct the memories, grief, and hope for the future that the Noh has forbidden.

Lost in Translation was published in 2002, but most of its episodes were written by Mack and drawn by Mays between 1999 and 2001. Artistically this installment of the story of the Noh is most like the earlier volumes of Kabuki, made up of starkly black and white panels across which blood, glass, ink, and smoke drift in beautiful abstract patterns. The story ends with a hauntingly familiar picture of Kabuki's distorted face as she crosses the borders of sanity in an attempt to second guess the Noh and save her own life.

[back to top](#)