

Designing a World

Although most Japanese know the core story of the *Mighty Atom* series, they often have very different mental images of it and of Atom's character. The impressions depend largely on what point in history they were exposed to the work, how old they were at the time, and whether they saw it in magazines, newspapers, paperback compilations, or later, in television animation.

Tezuka created his Mighty Atom character in a somewhat haphazard fashion as part of a story in *Shōnen* in 1951, but he did not make Atom the star of his own series until 1952. Tezuka continued to draw the *Mighty Atom* series in the same monthly magazine until it went out of business in 1968, but he also later serialized other *Atom* stories in the *Sankei* newspaper, in the *Tetsuwan Atomu Fan Club* magazine, and, as late as November 1981, in a publication for second graders. Over the years he was naturally able to rethink some of his original ideas, and for each publication and readership he tended to alter his drawing style and story lines slightly. As if that were not enough, unlike American comic book artists at the time (who were usually just one member of a larger production system established by a publisher), Tezuka had complete control over his work and often revised it by himself.

Like a movie editor who loves to cut and splice film, Tezuka seemed to get a real thrill out of revising. Sometimes the revisions were necessary because episodes initially serialized in magazines would not fit properly into the number of pages allotted in later paperback compilations, or onto different page sizes. But for Tezuka these revisions involved more than simply resizing images or cutting and pasting. In many cases he would redraw individual panels to make them fit better into a new layout or rework entire sections, adding or subtracting pages and changing things around to suit his evolving tastes. At times he even seemed to re-

gard the original magazine versions as a type of rough draft and every subsequent paperback collection as an opportunity to further polish his stories. Since *Mighty Atom* appeared in over ten different editions of paperback collections while Tezuka was alive, it can now be hard to know what some episodes were really like in their original format.

On top of this, when Tezuka animated his manga series for a weekly television show in 1963, he had to tailor his work to a less sophisticated mass audience, in essence to make his stories simpler. Inevitably, these styles developed for animation began to affect the styles that he used for his manga story. Furthermore, since the television series required fifty-two episodes per year, it soon outpaced the original manga production, so Tezuka had to create new stories exclusive to the TV series, and he often had to farm out the writing to other people. Thus, not all the manga stories were animated, and not all the animation episodes have manga counterparts. To complicate matters further, in 1980 Tezuka created a new color version of his originally black-and-white 1963 TV series, and, in 2003, fourteen years after his death, his company and Sony Pictures created yet another version with very different stories and computer-enhanced designs.



Despite the different versions of *Mighty Atom* in existence, there is a core story line that was developed in the original manga series, and it is quite simple.

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, Dr. Tenma, the brilliant director of the Ministry of Science's Department of Precision Machinery, tragically loses his beloved only son, Tobio, in a car crash. Using the "cream of Japanese technology," he creates an advanced robot to replace his son. This robot is truly state-of-the-art with unprecedented functionality, but Tenma has been slightly unhinged by his real son's death, and when he discovers that his surrogate robot-son does not grow, he becomes enraged and sells him to the circus. Thereafter

he loses his job at the Ministry of Science and becomes a mysterious hermit-like figure, only appearing in his robot-son's life at rare intervals in an unpredictable and not-always-benign fashion. His attitude toward robots is complicated, and instead of believing that they should be treated like humans, he essentially believes that they should be slaves.

In this world, robots and humans coexist, but most of the robots are far more primitive than Dr. Tenma's creation, which is capable of truly humanlike emotions and reasoning. In the circus, the boy robot is given the name "Atom" and forced to participate in gladiator-like fights where, much to his dismay, he must destroy his robot opponents. One day, however, he is spotted by Professor Ochanomizu, the scientist who has succeeded Tenma at the Ministry of Science. Like Tenma, Ochanomizu is a roboticist who is obsessed with robots, but he has a far greater understanding of and affection for them, and among robots he is regarded as almost a savior figure. Realizing what a truly advanced and superior robot Atom is, Ochanomizu manages to free him from the circus. A kindly (but sometimes emotional) man with a huge nose, he thereafter becomes Atom's surrogate father and always tries to help him.

Since Atom was designed to be a replacement for Tenma's son, he looks like a ten or twelve-year-old boy, but he has seven special powers built into him. Using jets in his feet and arms, he can fly through air; he speaks sixty languages fluently and can sense whether people are good or bad; he can amplify his hearing a thousand times and use his eyes as searchlights; and he has machine guns in his fanny. To make all this possible, he has a computer brain and a 100,000 horsepower atomic reactor in his chest.

Professor Ochanomizu nonetheless tries to help Atom integrate into human society and even to attend elementary school (depending on the episode, he was somewhere between the third and sixth grades). But as a brand-new robot

there are still many things that Atom does not know and must learn, and many aspects of human “common sense” that he has difficulty understanding, sometimes making him seem rather “bumbling.” This plot device allowed Tezuka to inject a great deal of humor into his stories, and it proved enormously popular with readers, in effect humanizing Atom. In the story, to assuage Atom’s loneliness and give him a more humanlike upbringing, Professor Ochanomizu also decides to create a robot family for him. He gives Atom an even more bumbling robot-father and an earnest, sweet mother, and later a sister (Uran) and a brother (Cobalt), but none of the other family members are as advanced as Atom. To the delight of young Japanese readers, while appearing “older” than Atom the parents were of course really “younger” (having been created later), and not quite as intelligent as him. In the episode “Atom Goes to Elementary School,” Atom attends Ochanomizu Elementary School as a fifth grader, but his parents have to enroll in the first grade.

At school, Atom tries to act as much as possible like a normal human boy. Unlike most American superheroes, he has no “secret identity,” yet he is able to blend in well, only rarely using his special powers. Approximately the same height and weight as his other schoolmates, he dresses in a typical 1950s-style schoolboy uniform of a front-buttoning black coat and short pants, and carries a knapsack-satchel to school. He has several pals, who are archetypes of typical Japanese schoolboys, and they are conveniently able to forget that their robot-friend is a walking nuclear power reactor. Ken’ichi is the good-looking, good student type; Tamao is a glasses-wearing, scrawny boy who is often harassed by other kids (and with whom Tezuka probably identified); and Shibugaki (whose name sounds like “bitter persimmon”), is the big, tough kid who hates to do homework, but who is actually somewhat spoiled—his parents are wealthy art collectors.

Atom's teacher is Shunsaku Ban, nicknamed *Higeoyaji*, or "Mustachio," because of his huge handlebar mustache. Mustachio is one of the main characters in many *Mighty Atom* episodes, and not only because he is Atom's teacher; he is also an expert in judo and other martial arts and an amateur private eye who likes to get involved in exciting, complicated cases. Other prominent characters include the Laurel and Hardy-like police inspectors Tawashi and Nakamura, as well as a raft of regular evil characters such as Skunk Kusai, Hamegg, and Acetylene Lamp. Then there are the robots of all shapes and sizes, both good and bad, who populate the world of the early twenty-first century, and with whom Atom must sometimes cooperate, sometimes fight, and sometimes save. Atom himself always tries to help humans.

To the delight of readers in 1952, although *Mighty Atom* was set fifty years in the future, the "future" that Tezuka depicted was a mixture of both the familiar and the futuristic. Atom's schoolmates wore typical Japanese schoolboy uniforms of the day, which were modeled after nineteenth-century Prussian army uniforms but allowed short pants. Mustachio, their teacher, sometimes wore Japanese wooden clogs and a threadbare business suit. And amid the skyscrapers, robots, and flying cars of future-Tokyo, there were occasionally old, run-down houses and streets of the early 1950s. As Tezuka later wrote, "If I were to draw a *really* futuristic city, it would look too strange to readers. They wouldn't be able to identify with it at all. So to make people feel more comfortable I occasionally include things from the era they know. . . . It's always an issue when drawing sci-fi manga."²¹