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YŌKAI, GHOSTS, ALIENS, AND URBAN LEGENDS: DANDADAN'S SCIENCE FANTASY WORLD

BY EUGENIO MINVIELLE

SCIENCE FANTASY – SUPERNATURAL – MANGA/ANIME

In 1997, *The Encyclopedia of Fantasy* described “Science Fantasy” to be “a bastard genre blending elements of sf and fantasy” and “sometimes with elements of horror” (Clute and Nicholls 1061). It’s easy to see why it gets a bad reputation: too often does Science Fantasy appear in crossover episodes where a sci-fi or fantasy trope drops into the “wrong” universe with no regard for lore or consequences. Not that I minded when this happened in *The Magic School Bus*, *Power Rangers*, *Dexter’s Laboratory*, or *Adventure Time*—but these days I find myself craving something more profound: stories with a deep and inspiring lore and a coherent logic. With such a wealth of mediocre Science Fantasy examples to pull from, I believe the genre’s potential was generally overlooked. That is to say, there was a niche audience who championed the early years of the developing genre through iconic books, comics, shows, and movies like *John Carter of Mars*, *Flash Gordon*, *Xena: Warrior Princess*, and *He-Man*, yet these science fantasy stories are often trivialized, enjoyed for the kitsch and unserious entertainment they provide in contrast to those epic stories placed in distinctly sci-fi and fantasy worlds (e.g. *Star Trek* and *Lord of the Rings*).

Now, twenty eight years later, it's clear to see Science Fantasy has grown into a handsome bastard much like Jon Snow (who, as we know, became very toned and sexy when he started taking his destiny into his own hands). At one end of the genre you have the juicy high fantasy and hard sci-fi blends like *Dune* and *Star Wars*, and at the other end the low fantasy and soft sci-fi side which takes place in a world like our own—*Stranger Things*, *The XFiles*, *Gravity Falls*, and...*Dandadan*.

The *Dandadan* series, written and illustrated by Yukinobu Tatsu, originally came out in 2021 as a manga (with fourteen volumes currently translated to English) and has since been adapted into an anime. This series fuses fantasy's *yōkai* and ghost lore with science fiction's flying saucers, reptilian aliens, and UFO cults. What makes *Dandadan* unique is how creatively it collapses the boundary between spiritual and extraterrestrial: aliens summon UFOs using occult-like rituals; the Loch Ness Monster resembles a young juvenile laser-firing Godzilla; a kappa named Mr. Mantis Shrimp sings nostalgic songs while throwing ultrasonic punches to receive his salaryman wage from the extorting Serpo Aliens. The intricate detail in these bizarre creatures not only enriches their aesthetic but also expands the lore, keeping me absorbed long after the first look.



Panel from Yukinobu Tatsu's *Dandadan*, Vol. 2

The story begins with Momo, a feisty teenage girl who believes in ghosts, but not aliens, and Okarun, a timid boy who believes the opposite. In a bid to prove each other wrong, they visit supernatural and alien hotspots, only to discover that ghosts and aliens exist, and maybe they were the same thing all along. Momo and Okarun's opposing worldviews—her ghost-believing mysticism and his alien-obsessed conspiracy theories—seem to be a perfect mirror of the debate between science fiction and fantasy purists. The sweet and seamless mixture of the genres and the unique cast of villains brings forth an energetic and unpredictable narrative.

Beneath all these fantastic elements is a surprisingly tender story about friendship and growing up. Momo and Okarun, who are both awkward and combative, gradually learn to trust each other. Both characters are misfits, and through battling cursed grandmothers, psychic aliens, and Mongolian death worms, they also battle self-doubt and loneliness. Their romance arc is wonderfully interwoven into the central narrative in a way that keeps it engaging and quick paced.

Now there is one aspect that makes me hesitant to recommend this series to just anyone: it has been appropriately rated M (for mature content). The series contains the following graphic content: sexual assault, body horror/gore, violence, and crude sexual innuendo. It sometimes includes disturbing content that's meant to unnerve the reader. Speculative fiction is a good way to broach uncomfortable topics, and *Dandadan* does this in a respectful way that calls attention to issues of injustice. In order to properly highlight these topics, the show temporarily pauses its usual upbeat comedy to let the audience sit with a discomfoting moment. These scenes often reveal a cultural insight, character history, or immediate threat of sexual and/or physical violence. While this subject matter is alarming in itself, it is even further heightened by the fact that the subjects of these assaults are most often children and teenagers. The inclusion of this content adds to the growing body of series that erode old assumptions that graphic texts are light, fun, fantastical works meant for children.

In conclusion, *Dandadan* stands as a shining example of how science fiction and fantasy can not only coexist but thrive when merged in a unique and imaginative way. By blending the supernatural with the extraterrestrial, the series challenges traditional genre boundaries and creates an engaging world full of quirky characters, rich lore, and emotional depth. It successfully weaves together elements of horror, romance, and science fantasy while addressing complex themes with sensitivity and nuance. The dynamic relationship between Momo and Okarun, alongside the outrageous and often bizarre encounters they face, keeps viewers on their toes and invested in the story. Ultimately, *Dandadan* is more than just a chaotic mash-up of genres—it's a testament to the power of creativity that can still be applied to common tropes to make them refreshingly captivating.

ABOUT EUGENIO MINVIELLE

Eugenio likes to make things from scratch—whether it's clay cups or beer batches—and he approached *Scattered Flock* the same way, inventing the name and shaping the magazine's design from the first page to the last. His favorite fantastical creatures are alebrijes; bright, surreal, and wonderfully unique. Manga is another obsession, one he pursued all the way into his Fantasy studies, and he'll happily talk your ear off about Isekai, monster folklore, or even sappy romances.



Panel from Yukinobu Tatsu's *Dandadan*, Vol. 3