

Embracing Love Vol. 1

by Janet Crocker

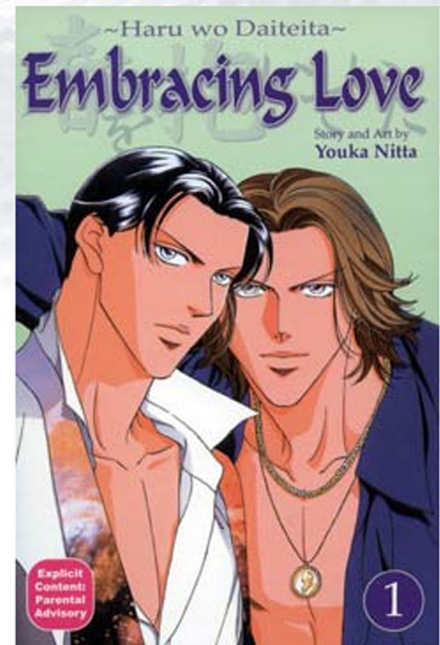
There's only so many ways that a yaoi romantic situation can be set up. There's the ever-popular knowledgeable sempai and the naive freshman at college. The yakuza member and the aspiring reporter, the bodyguard and the rich boy, police officer co-workers, the symphony conductor and a timid violinist... *Embracing Love* gives us a set of adult film stars, a rather refreshing pairing in yaoi manga.

Kyosuke Iwaki is a darkly handsome adult film star in his thirties. His rival is Yoji Katou, a brightly shining star in the industry in his twenties. The blonde Katou has been steadily rising in popularity, while Iwaki has been in decline and losing jobs to the younger man. Iwaki has become disillusioned with his job as well. When the opportunity appears for Iwaki to break free of the adult industry and to act in a film called "Embracing Love" about a homosexual couple, he jumps right into it. The trouble is that Katou is auditioning for the same role as well. Katou believes that since only the two of them were invited to audition, one of them will win the lead role, while the loser will get the "heroine" role, the uke position.

When they meet with Nagisa Sawa, the author of the book and director of the film, she tells them to audition by having sex with each other. As you can guess, things get hot quickly, despite neither man having experience with another guy. As it happens, Iwaki wins the role (I don't want to reveal one of the volume's plot twists here), and the movie goes on to become quite popular in Japan and abroad. A year later, "Embracing Love: The TV Series" is announced. Iwaki reprises his role, but he has a new partner onscreen -- Yoji Katou.

Reality and scripted life begin to intertwine. Katou deliberately lets the press snap a photo of him and Iwaki kissing, and rumours begin of their real life relationship, which begins to take up more room in the gossip columns of newspapers than the popular show itself. Iwaki distances himself from Katou, trying to squelch the rumours, but Katou only subtly feeds them. He sees this as great publicity, a chance for him and Iwaki to finally become true stars.

Things come to a head when Nagisa Sawa invites the pair over to her house to help her in researching for her new book, "Flesh Flute," about four homosexuals who don't have a regular partner. You can probably guess where this is leading... Regardless, hidden feelings are exposed, and Katou admits to falling in love with Iwaki, while Iwaki begins to examine that maybe he likes his rival as well. The first volume ends with the finishing of season one of "Embracing Love TV," and the couple taking things to the next level. It's a nice place to end the volume on, and it left me feeling very satisfied, but eager for the next volume.



The cover of this volume of *Embracing Love* is rather lack-luster, but I suppose that it does serve its purpose in advertising this manga as yaoi, with a picture of Iwari and Katou on the front, leaning into each other. The artwork inside, however, is great. Nitta does a great job of using space. Panels don't feel crowded, and toning and cross-hatching is subtly employed. The artwork doesn't feel rushed, as is the case with many manga. Instead, you can see how painstakingly Nitta has drawn Katou's mane of hair.

Unlike many other yaoi titles, the sexual acts in *Embracing Love* flow naturally out of situations in Iwaki and Katou's lives. As adult film actors, sex is what they do, so neither of them shows too much shyness in the uke position. That's a pet peeve of mine in yaoi; how the uke protests a little too much under the seme's usually rough ministrations.

Another aspect that I liked about the sex scenes is the inclusion of a lot of foreplay, as yaoi mangaka seem to want to jump right into the penetration, with perhaps a frame or two of open-mouth kissing and touching. *Embracing Love* is perfect for newcomers to the yaoi genre of manga, as the focus is more on a relationship story with a little graphic physical action as opposed to being a contentless flesh manga.

This volume of *Embracing Love* contains four chapters, plus a bonus story on a Iwari lookalike stalker of Katou. Additionally, we get another bonus story unrelated to *Embracing Love* called "Fence," about two high jump athletes. It's an average short yaoi story; the main story is what you pick up this volume for. Also included are character profiles, author's notes, afterthoughts, and a sneak peak at the second volume, which sounds to be just as good as the first.

Embracing Love continues the tradition of quality yaoi titles from Be Beautiful, and with Central Park Media planning to increase their production and distribution of manga and manwha in 2006, this could be a beautiful year for yaoi and its readers.

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Format: right-to-left manga / 216 pgs

Production: Be Beautiful / Youka Nitta / Biblos

Rating: 5/5

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