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Grad school confidential

In the classic underground comic strip *Art School Confidential*, by Daniel Clowes (creator of the *Ghost World* comic book and screenplay), one art-school instructor levels with her students, saying that only 10% of them will ever have successful careers in their field of choice. Re-reading this strip recently, I was struck by the resemblance of this message to what I would like to see science advisers at graduate schools say to their students and postdocs early on about the odds that they will land an academic job, post-PhD (see *Naturejobs* 3; 22 August 2002).

But I was also struck by the way in which the comic-strip art students reacted to that discouraging statistic. All of them had 'thought bubbles' floating over their heads filled with "It's going to be me!". One could read such sentiments — both for art students and science graduates — in two ways. The cynic would say: "What a terribly misguided, ultimately doomed bunch." The optimist would say: "It's great to see people pursue their dreams."

I put myself firmly in the optimist's camp. Science graduate students need to believe that they have a chance of success. Otherwise, why would they endure the daily grind of graduate school and the uncertainty of ever landing a permanent position?

So when the comic strip turns into a major motion picture later this year, science graduate students who go to watch it will imagine that its lead actor, John Malkovich, is wearing a lab coat rather than a smock. And they will probably nod in solidarity with their humanities viewers when the strip's filmic equivalent tells the student characters about their long odds. And, in all probability, art students and science students alike will vow to beat them.

Paul Smaglik
Naturejobs editor

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