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D.C.'s "Watchmen" empty heroes; Marvel's "Merc" mercenary madness

By Scott Wesely
Staff Reporter

"Watchmen," Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons (DC Comics)

The last two years have been very good for DC. Their "Crisis on Infinite Earths" maxiseries was well-received by both critics and fans, giving them the confidence to promote still more high quality format titles and specials.

Comics Now

Of these, "Watchmen" stands out as one of the best. Expert writer Alan Moore, noted for his work on "Swamp Thing" and "Miracleman," scripts "Watchmen," which deals with the innate childishness of heroism, covering an emptiness within an appearance of courage. Moore's heroic reality is a place where nothing you have ever regarded as sacred in comics is safe. Not even the virtue of the heroes.

"Watchmen" is, in a way, a treatise on how truly unrealistic the standard superhero comic is. The motivations of long-underwear clad crusaders wouldn't

be in any possible 'real' world, nearly as altruistic as they have been made out to be. One character in "Watchmen," Nite Owl, simply saw someone being a vigilante and decided it was for him. Another, Silhouette, saw the hero biz as a sexual turn-on. Still another, the Silk Spectre, felt compelled to wear outlandish costumes to appease her mother, who had been the first to live with that name. In many cases, the figures the media labeled as most heroic were, in fact, the most demented.

Moore's characters seem much more human as a result of this downplaying of out-and-out heroism. Which makes their superpowers, for those that have them, all the more frightening. "God exists, and he is American," says one commentator describing Dr. Manhattan, a blue reconstructed man with seemingly infinite power.

The fictional world of the "Watchmen" is on the brink of a nuclear war in their local year of 1985. The Keene Act of 1977 prohibited vigilante activity unless government-controlled. This put many masked avengers out of work. All had to face themselves and discover what their role really was in society.

Some of them just handled it worse than others. Like normal people.

Dave Gibbons' art is perfect for the mood of the story. A little dirty and cynical, very precise, very measured. The coloring is a mixture of brightness and shadow, lending the world an austere reality and covering a depressing subtext. I've heard that Moore presents his artists with pages upon pages of explicit directions as to how the artist should handle every little thing.

"Mark Hazzard: Merc," Peter David and Gray Morrow (Marvel Comics)

Marvel's New Universe titles have, with few exceptions, proven to be bombs in quality, if not sales. "Merc" is one of those exceptions. I've always liked Peter David's work and he's done another good job in his portrayal of a butt-kicking jerk of a mercenary by the name of Mark Hazzard. Hazzard has combat sense, but no consideration. His tactics are two-sided: Be reasonable and therefore weak, or go full out and deal with the consequences later. Can you guess which one he usually chooses?

Hazzard is enough of an asshole to foul things up for any reasonable character the writer might throw into the book, so they are left out of "Merc" entirely. Oh, they aren't all jerks, but they're all very self-centered and uncompromising. David handles all these idiots in such a way that you can clearly see their faults for what they are and still have a good time watching them make mistakes. That's the sign of a good comic writer.

"Electric Warrior," Doug Moench and Jim Baikie (DC Comics)

Another of DC's new Baxter \$1.50 titles, "Electric Warrior," makes an effort to be stylistic and realistic like "Watchmen," though it is obviously not on the same order of genius. Moench is a very consistent writer, tending to produce good material everywhere you look, but little truly great material.

"Electric Warrior" first came out, I bought the book mainly because of Moench's name, having admired his writing on "Aztec Ace" a year or two back and on the Batman titles which he has done for several years. I wasn't too impressed upon actually reading the book, though. He seemed to have taken many SF cliches and comic cliches, merging them into something that only seemed fresh and new. The plot, in short, was not very interesting. The characters, on the other hand, were whole and individual, as all of Moench's are.

Now the comic is on its eighth issue, and I find myself growing more and more fond of it. The story seems to finally mean something more than a cliché fusion, and the characters have undergone drastic changes that the reader has witnessed, giving us an understanding of what the characters are actually going through. I wonder... was this Moench's intention?

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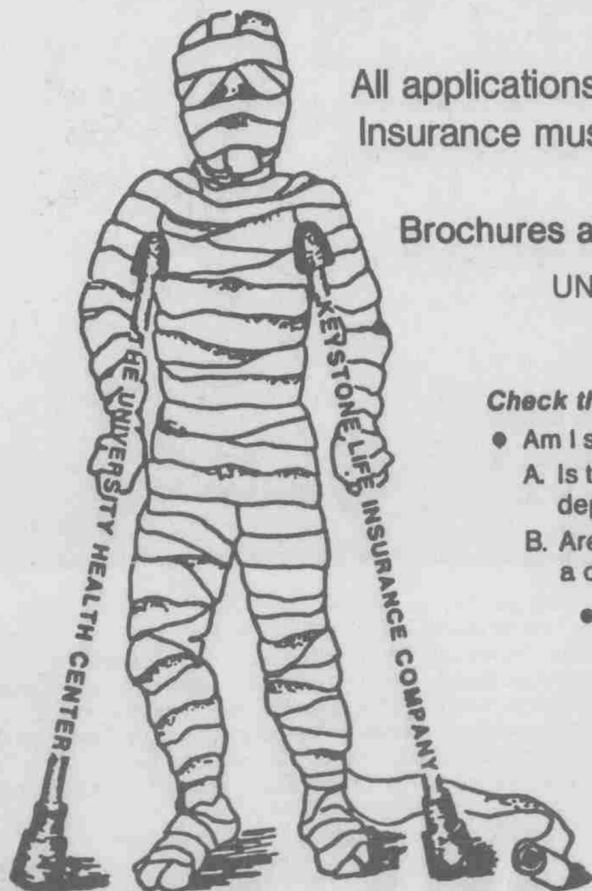
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