

Moore's 'Swamp Thing,' 'Miracleman' best of comic prose

By Chris McCubbin
Diversions Editor

There's really very little doubt that the single best writer working in the field of comics today is an Englishman named Alan Moore. With all due respect to Frank Miller and Howard Chaykin and Los Brothers Hernandez and a few other indisputably brilliant comic creators, Alan Moore is, beyond doubt, the best writer of English prose in the industry today.

Comics Now

What makes Moore so good? Well, there are his characters, which are, in the best paradoxical comic tradition, both thoroughly larger than life and thoroughly lifelike. There are his plots, which combine wild, unheard-of flights of fantasy with beautifully, brutally rational plot development.

And then there's his prose. Moore's prose evokes many good things, among them, things by people like William Faulkner, Edgar Allan Poe, H.P. Lovecraft and Stephen King. But Moore's voice is uniquely his own. He doesn't write much like anyone else at all, and nothing whatsoever like anyone else in comics.

Here's an example of how Moore writes from a promotional blurb he did

for "Swamp Thing."

"And there was a teenage girl who also came, her despair so fierce and black that the midges would not gather to her. The shopping bag in her hand contained something small and still and cold and a stone to weight it down with. Her heart contained the same things, but after a different fashion. The first she let slip beneath the iridescent scum. The second she took away and carried with her always."

All right, maybe a whole novel full of this sort of stuff would start to sound pretty dumb. But Moore doesn't write novels, he writes comic books, and this baroque, unabashedly purple style, this snaky, sultry, scary sensuality, is perfect for the unbridled explosion of fury and emotion that is a well-done adventure comic. And yet somehow Moore manages to create all these worlds and things and moods using fewer words than 75 percent of comics writers today would use to say "Monster A slugged Hero B."

Moore has written many, many comics. In all styles and genres. But he's doing three series of special interest to American readers right now.

"Miracleman" (Eclipse) "Miracleman" has roots that go back to the very first days of the comic book industry. I wish I had space to run down this character's fascinating pre-Alan Moore history, but I don't. Suffice

it to say that this character starred in an immensely popular line of British kiddie comics at about the same time that Moore was a British kiddie.

During the '60s the series went away. In the early '80s Moore was working for a comic magazine for grown-ups called "Warrior," and he took this beloved old character, as well-known to British audiences as Superman or Snoopy, and started doing things to him — things that had never been done to a superhero before.

"Miracleman" is a very deep work, in some ways. It's really a very tight piece of speculative, sociological science fiction that just happens to look a lot like a superhero comic book.

Moore gets his themes from the big guns. Most notably, in "Miracleman," Jung and Nietzsche. In one early issue a young boy stumbles upon Miracleman in a secluded glade in a park. Understandably, the lad wants to know if this huge, unhumanly beautiful stranger in a skintight blue body suit, surrounded by a faint, shimmering halo of light, is really the superbeing he appears to be, or just a large and potentially dangerous sissy-boy. So the kid asks him. But his thick London accent distorts the word "hero." What Miracleman hears is: "Are you a pouf, or are you a nero?"

That's the central question of this book. If supermen really walked among us, would they be the harmless, helpful

poufs of the comics or would they be pitiless conquering Neros?

"Watchmen" (DC)

This is a 12-issue miniseries. "Watchmen" has been hailed as the greatest thing ever to happen to superhero comics by many fans. I think that the characters are significantly less interesting and the plot much more draggy than either of the other series I'm talking about in this column. Still, "Watchmen" is a fascinating story.

Once again the central question of the series is: "What if comic characters were in the real world?" This time Moore is concerned less with superheroes than he is with "mystery men," ordinary people who put on tights and a mask and go out to fight crime. Why would they do it? Altruism? Publicity? Because they like to hit people? Because they like to be hit?

The situation is complicated by Dr. Manhattan, a bona-fide, godlike superman man with the power to do just about bloody anything, who has become the cornerstone of America's defense policy.

At the current point in the storyline someone is systematically killing off the mystery men, and Dr. Manhattan, in a fit of pique, has moved to Mars without telling anybody, leaving America totally vulnerable to her enemies. "Watchmen" is quickly building to what promises to be a very big finish.

"Swamp Thing" (DC)

In my opinion, "Swamp Thing," when it was being done by Moore, Stephan Bissette and John Totleben, was the single best comic book adventure series ever done in any language. Now Bissette and Totleben have moved on, leaving the book in the only slightly less brilliant hands of Rick Veitch and Alfredo Alcala. Moore has just announced he'll be leaving the series within the next six months, so get in on this classic in the making while you still can.

"Swamp Thing" is a horror-adventure book. The character was originally created by Len Wein and Berni Wrightson in 1971. The Wein-Wrightson "Swamp Thing" is rightly considered a classic in its own right. Swamp Thing was the star of a well-made and amusing "B" movie years before Moore started on the book. The comic book was revived to coincide with the release of the movie. Moore took over with issue 20 of the second "Swamp Thing" series.

Instead of the philosophical and social subtexts of Moore's other series, "Swamp Thing" is founded on myth, mysticism and superstition. Moore takes this book into places horror fiction, let alone horror comics, have never dreamed of before. This is a book of contrast and contradiction. "Swamp Thing" is often grotesque, often beautiful, often beautifully grotesque.

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