

Batman

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longer a housing project — it is a prison. People are born there, and they die there. Martha escapes by killing a hit man, who murdered her teacher, and she is sent to a mental institute. She manages to escape from there and joins PAX, a new U.S. peacekeeping force. She is sent to the Amazon to fight in the burger wars. The major burger corporations are there trying to secure more land for cattle grazing and PAX is sent in to stop them. It is revealed here that Moretti, Washington's commanding officer, is betraying PAX. When he discovers Washington, he tries to kill her. Instead they wound each other, and neither tells anyone of the other's betrayal.

Things go downhill from here. The Apache nation in Arizona, who is dying of radiation from a government plant, decides to fight back. The president responds by ordering the laser cannons in outer space to eradicate all of the Apaches. The president is then killed by his staff members, the White House is blown up, the surgeon general, who has his own nuclear weapons, goes mad and embarks on a mission to kill the disease that is called America, and civil war breaks out across the country. Meanwhile, Martha escapes from the surgeon general and tries to stop the madness.

A book like "Give Me Liberty," that is so well plotted and so detailed cannot be easily explained. The last issue, which shows the war between the surgeon general and PAX, as well as the civil uprisings across the nation, will keep you turning the pages. Although it does not end how I wanted it to, with Martha becoming president, the ending allows Miller to continue the story. In a letter he wrote to artist Dave Gibbons, Miller said: "I miss Martha already."

So do I, and I hope that he continues the series in the future.

This second place book is "Watchmen," written by Alan Moore and drawn by Dave Gibbons. "Watchmen" was released by DC Comics in 1986 in a 12-part series. Like "Give Me Liberty," "Watchmen" was released in a collected volume that is much easier to find than the individual issues.

"Watchmen" asks the question: What if there were real super-heroes in the real world? Beginning in the late '30s, heroes slowly began to become more and more public. By the middle of the '70s, however, the police become outraged at the presence of costumed heroes, and in 1977 the Keene Act is passed, outlawing all super-hero activity, unless, of course, the super-heroes work for the government. All the heroes quit, except The Comedian, a gung-ho military type guy; Dr. Manhattan, who can control anything and do anything (all scientific advances are made because of Dr. Manhattan — he has pushed humanity's science about a hundred years into the future); and

Rorschach, a crazy vigilante who refuses to quit operating, even with government pressure.

The story begins with the Comedian getting killed and Rorschach investigating. The world hangs on the verge of World War III; Dr. Manhattan is the only person who keeps the Russians from starting a war; Dr. Manhattan is so powerful that he can destroy large portions of Russia before they even have a chance to react. Throughout the course of the story, other heroes begin to come out of retirement because it appears as if someone is trying to kill old super-heroes. Meanwhile, Dr. Manhattan exiles himself to Mars, and Russia invades Afghanistan.

This is where the second major question the book tries to answer comes in: How far would you go to prevent a world war? How many people would you sacrifice? I'm not going to give all of the details of what happens in the last half of this book, because that would ruin the unbelievable ending.

Moore is credited with creating the grim and gritty hero with this book, and the writing style of this book is very often imitated by lesser talents. (Moore himself refuses to acknowledge he started the grim and gritty hero.)

The writing is very intricate, weaving several subplots throughout the book. Seemingly unrelated events are all pulled together in the end; no loose ends are left dangling.

"Watchmen" is an excellent book, and even though I've only given a tiny synopsis of the story, it is well worth reading, and well worth the cover price. Even if you don't normally read comics, check this out.

And the all-time best comic book, in my humble opinion, is "Batman: The Dark Knight Returns." Written and drawn by Frank Miller, inked by Klaus Janson, and colored by Miller's wife Lynn Varley, "The Dark Knight Returns" is a tour de force that takes place 15 years after Batman retires. Crime reaches a boiling point, however, and Bruce Wayne decides to come out of retirement. In a scene that parallels Batman's origin, a giant bat crashes into Wayne's study, which he takes as an omen to once again don the Batman costume.

This Batman, however, takes no prisoners. In the early scenes the reader does not actually see Batman, but only catches glimpses of him. When Miller finally reveals the Batman to us, the sight is quite awe-inspiring.

Batman takes down Two-face and then goes against the Mutant gang, a group of criminals who overrun Gotham. The Batmobile is a tank, complete with rocket launchers and machine guns, which supposedly shoot rubber bullets.

This story has everything. Superman now works for the government and in the end is sent to destroy Batman, who the U.S. government sees as a liability. The Joker is released and goes on

"Letterman," where he kills everyone. There is a brief nuclear war. The new Robin is a girl named Carrie, and in the end Batman dies. Or does he?

This story, by far, is the most imitated in comics. Miller's tale helped create an entire new generation of writers and artists hoping to re-create this masterpiece, but using different characters. None have even come close. This piece of work is Miller's greatest, and it shows what the comic book medium is capable of, if creators are given free editorial reign.

"Batman: The Dark Knight Returns" was released in four parts in the spring of 1985. Although the

back issues command high prices, collected editions are available. It will probably be some time before a comic book as important and influential as "The Dark Knight Returns" is released. It is a true masterpiece.

William J. Harms

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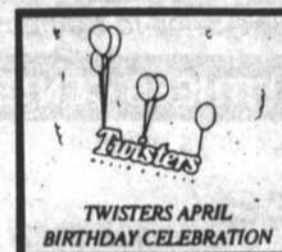


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