

Superhero Soup

Catwoman: The Dark End of the Street

ISBN: 1563899086

by Ed Brubaker

Art by Darwyn Cooke, Mike Allred, Cameron Stewart

DC Comics 2002

" My world is all just shades of grey, Batman"

I love Catwoman. It's not just her slick black costume with the pointy ears or her way with a whip, it's her shades of gray. Catwoman is the most morally ambiguous of superhero characters. She's a villain, a cat-burglar, yet she also has a strong sense of justice. Plus, Batman once loved her. What keeps the Cat and the Bat apart is a question of worldview; for Selina Kyle, raised on the streets, a superhero's notion of good and evil is too simplistic. Ed Brubaker, one of the best writers in comics, has crafted a moving and brilliant story of Catwoman's return to life after being presumed dead for years. Selina Kyle needs some time off. She's not sure where she fits into the world anymore, and she doesn't want to be controlled by the mask she wears. Yet she also yearns to give something back to the streets from which she escaped. Returning to a secret safe house she set up for young girls working the street, Selina learns that a murderer is preying on Gotham's prostitutes. The police don't consider these victims worth their time, and even Batman doesn't have much sympathy for women who choose to break the law. If no one else will speak for them, maybe Catwoman can! Soon Selina is prowling the night in a new, more practical costume and tracking the serial killer. She'll soon learn, however, that the monster she seeks has his own shades of gray.

I can't say enough about **The Dark End of the Street**. The art is as good as the writing, if not better; Darwyn Cooke's elegant, film-noir style is a little bit like the incomparable Powers but has a retro verve all its own (when I use this many adjectives, you know it's got to be good!). Each panel adds to the nocturnal atmosphere of Catwoman's world. While the story deals with prostitution and violence, nothing is graphic or explicit. Part superhero comic, part detective story, *The Dark End of the Street* is really the story of a woman making peace with herself.

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Astro City: Life in the Big City

ISBN: 156389551X

By Kurt Busiek

Art by Brent E. Anderson and Alex Ross

DC Comics 2000

Ever wondered what superheroes do in their off time? Do they even *have* off time? Go on dates? Go shopping? Hang out with their friends? Kurt Busiek has created a wonderful series considering these burning questions with **Astro City**, and with Alex Ross and Brent Anderson creating such vibrant visuals, there's never a boring moment.

review by [robin](#)

If you like **Astro City**, you should definitely check out Kurt Busiek's **Marvels**, another team up with Alex

Ross. This time the author takes a look at the history of the Marvel Universe from the everyman's perspective -- not to be missed!

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Catwoman: Selina's Big Score

ISBN: 1563898977

by Darwyn Cooke

Color by Matt Hollingsworth

DC Comics 2002

Selina Kyle is about to come back from the dead, but she needs some money first. Much as she hates returning to Gotham, one last "big score" will help her start a new life. When "working girl" Chantal comes along with information about a train-load of dirty Mafia money, Selina sees a chance to help a girl like her former self escape a life of exploitation. To pull off this heist, Selina will have to confront her past in more ways than one. She'll need some friends in Gotham. Above all she'll need master-thief Stark, the man who took her off the streets and gave her the skills she would later use as Catwoman. There's just one problem: the last time Selina saw Stark, she betrayed him. Will he trust her again?

Selina's Big Score overlaps in time with **The Dark End of the Street**, weaving in Selina's encounters with private detective Slam Bradley. We learn what happens between their first meeting and the return of the new Catwoman. It's a nail-biting crime story with an explosive ending; Selina might steal herself a new life, but not without paying a horrible price. The subject matter is pretty adult, but the presentation is impeccably tasteful. Crime and noir fans will love this critically acclaimed graphic novel, and Catwoman fans will love seeing Selina in action without her mask. I've already enthused about Darwyn Cooke's gorgeous art in **The Dark End of the Street**, and his writing is a worthy partner for his elegant style. What really stands out in **Selina's Big Score** is Matt Hollingsworth's color; the pages are awash with bright, bold hues that glow against Cooke's dramatic shadows.

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Black Canary/Oracle: Birds of Prey

ISBN: 156389484X

By Chuck Dixon and Jordan Gorfinkley

Art by Various artists

DC Comics 1999

What about the women? Well, two of the hottest female superheroes in DC's universe Black Canary and Oracle together form Birds of Prey. Black Canary is sassy, deadly, and fully capable of wiping the floor with the bad guys. Oracle, once Batgirl until the Joker's violent trick confined her to a wheelchair, is Black Canary's lightning fast link to all information via the Internet. She's also often Black Canary's conscience and more often than she'd like, her mother hen. Together, they're a force even the Dark Knight himself is impressed by.

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The Authority: Relentless

ISBN: 1563896613

by Warren Ellis

Art by Paul Neary and Bryan Hitch

DC Comics 2000

I had heard a great deal about The Authority, in general comments about the series' excellence and in specific about its groundbreaking characters (see my [random thoughts](#) on this distinction). As you may have noticed by now, I love superhero comics as much as the next guy, but I love them even more when the stories twist expectations. The Authority is a kind of descendant of Alan Moore's **Watchmen** and the familiar Justice League set-up. A group of empowered beings decide that they have a duty to change the world for the better. The difference here is that since attempting to convince the world to change has failed, they will enforce change. The world will be better, or face The Authority's judgement and sentence. The members of the Authority are familiar and different at the same time - key members Apollo and the Midnighter follow the Superman and Batman mold respectively. Other members exhibit inventive new powers, from Jack Hawksmoor's ability to feel and integrate with the spirit of cities to the Engineer's evolution into a human being with machines making up her very blood. Their unflappable and dangerous leader is Jenny Sparks, Spirit of the Twentieth Century, gifted with the power to focus and control electricity. Warren Ellis' writing is witty and suitably dark, and the artwork shows once again the depth and beauty computer aided color can bring to comics. For superheroes with one-liners, intelligence, and brawn to spare, flip to The Authority.

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Global Frequency: Planet Ablaze

Volume 1

ISBN: 1401202748

By Warren Ellis

Art by Garry Leach, Glen Fabry, Steve Dillon, Roy Martinez, Jon J Muth, David Lloyd, David Baron

DC Comics 2004

Warren Ellis has a penchant for creating kick-ass female leaders. Miranda Zero of the Global Frequency is the most recent addition to the ranks of strong women to emerge from Warren Ellis' fertile and strange imagination (see also - Jenny Sparks from **The Authority** and Jakita Wagner of **Planetary**). Ms. Zero is the somewhat mysterious leader of the civilian organization known as the Global Frequency. There are 1001 members of the Global Frequency, scattered across both disciplines and the globe. When a situation arises she calls on them to respond depending on their proximity, expertise and the degree of desperation. Efforts are coordinated through the punk wild child Aleph, the nexus point for the Global Frequency. They are the self-appointed defenders of the world, and their ranks are made up of those whom the system has betrayed. In this first volume they stop a black hole from opening in San Francisco, disarm a bioweapon before it can detonate, and neutralize a new age geek cult before they can suicide taking innocents along with them. Each story is illustrated by a different artist, which makes the artwork on this volume inconsistent. Some of it I loved, like Jon J. Muth's work on 'Big Sky' showcasing gorgeous colors and a beautiful simplicity of line, and some of it I didn't care for much. Like most of Warren Ellis' work this is not for the faint of heart, or for younger readers - although in this case that's more because of blood, guts

and gore, than for language or content. I'm curious to see where he is going to go with this series, and what kind of social commentary he is going to make.

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Planetary: All Over the World and Other Stories

ISBN: 1563896486

By Warren Ellis

Art by John Cassidy

Wildstorm 2000

Planetary agents are archeologists of the planet's secret history. In this first volume in a series by Warren Ellis (also known for [The Authority](#), [Stormwatch](#) and [Transmetropolitan](#)) the reader is introduced to field team ñ Jakita Wagner, the team leader; Mr. Snow, born in 1900; and The Drummer (first name "The" second name "Drummer") who communicates with machines and emits his own signal jamming field ñ and Planetary, the mysterious and very well funded agency that they represent. The origins of Planetary seem innocuous at first. The trio investigates instances of the unexplained, the supernatural and the unusual, such as the skeletal remains of enormous sci-fi moviesque beasts on an icy island between Japan and Russia; or the implications of an underground laboratory with no visible entrance guarded by a man who should have died 50 years earlier. However, as Mr. Snow, the most recent member of Planetary, becomes more comfortable in his new job, he becomes more suspicious about the origins and purposes of the organization he works for.

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The Victorian

Act 1: Self Realization

ISBN: 0967368316

Act 2: Self-Immolation

ISBN: 0967368383

By Trainor Houghton

Art by Lovern Kindzierski, Len Wein, Jim Bakie, Claude St. Aubin, Andrew Pepoy, Chris Chuckry,

Richard Starkings, and Jason Levine

Penny-Farthing Press 1999, 2002

The Victorian is a story told backwards, which is appropriate for a saga about time travel, voodoo, occult science, and a mystery that none of the principal characters fully comprehend. Winston Fitzrandolph, a professor of Victorian history with a past full of dark memories, is summoned to New Orleans to examine some antiques for a mysterious patron. Eudora Kincaid, a teenage photographer with a penchant for shady situations, befriends a New Orleans cabdriver. Detectives Leviticus ìDocí Schumpert and Hal Keller investigate a murder and a voodoo shrine. Claude BallarÈ plots something sinister in an underground stronghold. As the story progresses, crime in 2006 and the activities of The Order of the Blue Rose in the 19th century bring all these unlikely characters together as they are drawn to and chased by the mysterious figure of ìThe Victorian.î This shadowy, top-hat-wearing being haunts the streets and bayous of Louisiana,

terrorizing New Orleans criminals, then vanishing. Writer Trainor Houghton and script-writer Lovorn Kindziarski unfold the story with deliberate speed, seemingly unconcerned that readers won't fully understand what's going on until the end of this 5-part series. As you read beyond the first Act's bewildering opening montage of scenes and time periods, you will begin to feel the threads of a complicated story tightening like a spider's web. The Victorian and his contemporaries in 2006 and 1889 are heading towards an earth-shaking discovery, and all their readers can do is hang on for the ride.

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Jenny Sparks: The Secret History of the Authority

ISBN: 1563897695

by Mark Millar

Art by John McCrea

DC Comics 2001

Jenny Sparks is, according to those involved, a blond, female, and distinctly more super-powered version of her creator, the dynamic Warren Ellis (although there are those who would argue that he has plenty of superpowers of his own). When Ellis left **The Authority** in Mark Millar's hands, Jenny too made her exit, for no one could quite fathom Jenny Sparks without Ellis' spirit behind her. Jump forward a couple of years and Millar, with Ellis' blessing, decides to give the impossible task a whack and revisit **The Authority's** fearless leader's life. Shuttling back and forth through the 20th century (of course), we get to see moments private and grand. The tale is happily executed with all the familiar in your face attitude we readers have all missed. A welcome return of a unique and complex superhero, this volume also highlights the genius of both series' writers and the unforgettable icon of a new cast for superheroes.

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Ultimate X-Men

by Mark Millar

Marvel Comics 2002-2005

The X-men made their first appearance in the 1960's. In the intervening four decades the X-men mythos has been reinvented any number of times. However, the central message of tolerance and the struggle for acceptance that the X-men represent remains unchanged and relevant. Ultimate X-men is the latest incarnation of the series, updating the comic's context while retaining its core plot lines. It is both an accessible introduction to the universe for first time readers, and a worthy next generation for long time fans. [read more...](#)

The Complete Series

[Ultimate X-Men: The Tomorrow People \(Volume 1\)](#)

[Ultimate X-Men: Return to Weapon X \(Volume 2\)](#)

[Ultimate X-Men: World Tour \(Volume 3\)](#)

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[Ultimate X-Men: Ultimate War \(Volume 5\)](#)

[Ultimate X-Men: Return of the King \(Volume 6\)](#)

[Ultimate X-Men: Block Buster \(Volume 7\)](#)

[Ultimate X-Men: New Mutants \(Volume 8\)](#)

[Ultimate X-Men: The Tempest \(Volume 9\)](#)

[Ultimate X-Men: Cry Wolf \(Volume 10\)](#)

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Batman: The Dark Knight Returns

ISBN: 1563893428

By Frank Miller

Art by Frank Miller, Klaus Janson, and Lynn Varley

DC Comics 1997

Sinister, fierce, and burning with power, reacting against the new laws prohibiting superheroes from walking the streets, the Dark Knight returns to his crime fighting ways after a ten year absence. Frank Miller made comic history in the 80s with this reinvention of Batman -- and deservedly so. This collection remains one of the most powerful examples of just what a superhero tale can be.

review by [robin](#)

If you discover you're craving more tales of the big Bat, check out these titles:

Batman: The Killing Joke by Alan Moore

ISBN: 0930289455

Batman: Year One by Frank Miller

ISBN: 0930289331

The Dark Knight Strikes Again (the much anticipated sequel to Dark Knight Returns) by Frank Miller

ISBN: 1563898705

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Watchmen

ISBN: 0930289234

By Alan Moore

Art by Dave Gibbons

Warner Books 1995

If you're like me, reading superhero tales, there is also that nagging, logical question in the back of your mind -- just why *are* these particular men and women driven to put on costumes and become, for all intents and purposes, vigilantes? There's a reason people didn't trust Batman when he first roamed the streets of Gotham -- who was he to judge who was right and who was wrong? Superman may have a noble and undeniable calling, but many of these figures, Batman perhaps the most darkly conflicted, have other, more human reasons for what they do. **Watchmen**, full of superheroes of the same breed as Superman, Spiderman, and Wonder Woman, explores all the complicated answers provoked by these questions. In its pages, not only do we find a little superhero in ourselves, but also find the humanity, flawed or noble, in the heroes elevated above us.

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Starman: Sins of the Father

ISBN: 1563892480

By James Robinson

Art by Tony Harris, Bob Kahan, and Wade von Grawbadger

DC Comics 1996

Jack Knight is having a bad day. His older brother has been murdered, his father attacked, and he's expected take up the family tradition -- being Opal City's guardian, Starman. Never mind that he's never had any interest in being a superhero. Never mind that he's being attacked left and right by old enemies without any idea of why. Will he rise to the occasion or will he prove his inner demons right -- and fail?

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Green Arrow: Quiver

ISBN: 1563899655

by Kevin Smith

Art by Phil Hester, Ande Parks, Guy Major, and Sean Konot

DC Comics 2002

The number of times I laughed out loud at this title (and they were too numerous to count) should not in any way detract from the seriousness of its issues or the craft of its creators. If anything, readers should be grateful for a tale that's smart, dramatic, full of excellent DC and Green Arrow canonical references, and, with all that, makes you guffaw at least once. Kevin Smith whips out some truly wonderful one-liners and perfectly timed conversations, my personal favorite an exchange between the Flash and Batman that proves the Dark Knight is anything but humorless. At this point, no one should be surprised that Kevin Smith is a

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The great part of this title is, however, the more unexpected depth and heart that Smith filled this tale with (though anyone who saw and loved *Dogma* as I did should know better.) As with that complex film, Smith tackles what it means to have faith, to have a soul, and how much a man needs all of his past, from shameful moments to pain as well as love and joy, to be human. All of these issues are contemplated fully, emotionally, though they are contrasted and lightened up by the sparks of humor.

The artwork is top-notch -- my favorite kind of superhero work where they all look like heroes, yes, but not too far from actual anatomy. The expressions are also particularly fine -- the interactions between Aquaman and Green Arrow are priceless in both word and image.

I was originally warned that this title was way too full of canon references for me to try: I have never read Green Arrow comics and only know what little I know about that hero from references in *Birds of Prey*. As a newbie, though, I can say, despite occasional moments of character vertigo, I was well able to follow and thoroughly enjoy the story. I could tell that if I knew the character and his world, the story would undoubtedly have been richer, but it was a fine feast for me as is.

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Outsiders: Sum of All Evil (Volume 2)

ISBN: 1401202438

By Judd Winick

Art by Tom Raney, Will Conrad, Tom Derenick
DC Comics 2004

Judd Winick is rapidly becoming one of my trusted writers. That is to say, writers I will read no matter what they're writing. I wasn't sure what to expect from the second volume of **Outsiders**. I liked the first volume, but didn't know where Winick was going to go that wouldn't be just another superhero story. He blew me away with the second volume which is all about consequences. Most superhero comics brush over