

Behind the Mask

The stars of Alan Moore's 'Watchmen' comics are dark and complicated.

ABSOLUTE WATCHMEN

By Alan Moore. Illustrated by Dave Gibbons. 464 pp. DC Comics. \$75.

By DAVE ITZKOFF

THE next comic book artist who argues that his medium needs more realism — that his imaginary universe of costumed deities able to defy gravity, shoot heat beams from their eyes and level skyscrapers with a single punch isn't gritty or violent enough to hold the attention of today's savvy young readers — ought to be socked on the jaw. Failing that, he should march himself to the nearest comic book store, thumb through the latest pulp chronicles of crime-fighters who kill and villains who commit rape and advocate genocide, and decide for himself if the modern graphic novel isn't sufficiently graphic already. Better yet, he should simply reread the comics of Alan Moore.

An influential fantasy author for almost a quarter-century, the British-born Moore has often used comics to illustrate how reality can be deadlier to superheroes than Kryptonite. In the early 1980's serial "Marvelman" (rechristened "Miracleman" in America), Moore experimented with a Superman-like do-gooder who decides to use his powers for the betterment of mankind — and ends up creating a society that is utopian to the point of tediousness. In the contemporaneous "V For Vendetta," Moore explored a mirror-image scenario: a fascist Britain tormented by the violent resistance of V, an enigmatic, Shakespeare-quoting avenger in a Guy Fawkes mask. For all his charms, V is, by his author's own admission, a terrorist whose bloodthirsty anarchy is only marginally better than the totalitarianism he seeks to upend. If you identify with V's struggle, you must embrace a story that begins with the bombing of the Houses of Parliament and ends with the destruction of 10 Downing Street.

When the first issue of Moore's 12-part magnum opus, "Watchmen," made its debut in 1986, what made it so remarkable was how conventional — and authentic — its universe felt. The preliminary notes of the illustrator Dave Gibbons — included in this oversized hardcover reissue, along with script pages, the original series proposal and other long-unavailable material — envisioned an alternate reality of geodesic domes, airships and submarine freighters. But the world of "Watchmen" is indisputably our own, one in which Richard Nixon was elected president, the United States waged war in Vietnam and Kitty Genovese was murdered in Kew Gardens, Queens, while her neighbors stood by.

The would-be heroes of "Watchmen" have staggeringly complex psychological profiles: beneath his mask, the hard-nosed vigilante Rorschach is not a billionaire Bruce Wayne-like playboy but a troubled loner with a sociopathic streak. The gadget-dependent Nite-Owl is a sexually impotent pushover. Dr. Manhattan, the lone character who genuinely possesses supernatural powers (gained from a quantum physics experiment gone horribly wrong), is so close to godhood that he can appreciate human affairs only at a subatomic scale. "A live body and a dead body contain the same

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FROM "ABSOLUTE WATCHMEN"

number of particles," he observes. "Structurally, there's no discernible difference."

It's tempting, and entirely possible, to appreciate "Watchmen" solely at a microscopic level, to lose oneself in Moore and Gibbons's multilayered narrative techniques or to unpack their allusions to everything from "The Threepenny Opera" to the Book of Job to Bob Dylan's "Desolation Row."

But the story of "Watchmen," carefully plotted and decidedly finite, deserves equally close attention, as its acuteness has not dulled with age. What begins as a routine investigation into the death of a retired adventurer becomes a wide-ranging journey that forces each of its principal characters to revisit his inadequacies as a protector of humanity, and ends with them being compelled to enter into a bargain that keeps mankind safe while utterly compromising any right they have to call themselves heroes. If we imbue our champions with the weaknesses of ordinary mortals, Moore asks, and confine them to a cosmos where good and evil are subjective notions and right never triumphs over wrong, what's the point of having heroes at all? "Y'know, superheroes are finished," laments a hopeless news vendor who functions as the Greek chorus in "Watchmen." "These days, it's all pirates."

Nearly 20 years after the original publication, "Watchmen" shows an eerie prescience: the symmetry between current events and the conclusion of its story, concerning a villain who believes he can stave off real war by distracting the populace with a trumped-up one, and an act of mass murder perpetrated in the heart of New York City, is almost too fearful to bear.

But "Watchmen" has another legacy, one that Moore almost certainly never intended, whose DNA is encoded in the increasingly black inks and bleak storylines that have become the essential elements of the contemporary superhero comic book—a domain he has largely ceded to writers and artists who share his fascination with brutality but not his interest in its consequences, his eagerness to tear down old boundaries but not his drive to find new ones. To his credit, Moore never gave in to the commercial pressure to write a sequel to "Watchmen," and he rarely returns to the superhero genre now. Perhaps he is satisfied with what he's already accomplished and is searching for new challenges. Or perhaps he knows that the age of superheroes is over, and from here on out, it's all pirates. □

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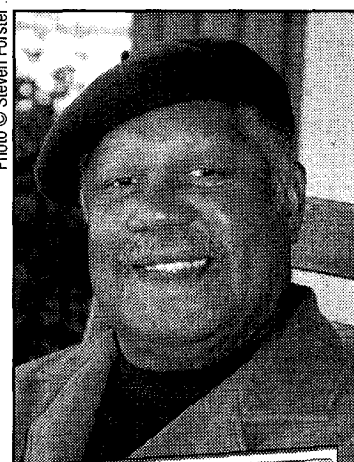
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MOZART AND LEADBELLY

STORIES AND ESSAYS

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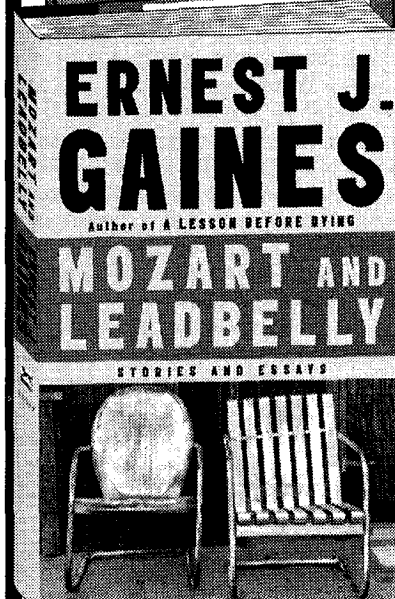
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