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BOOKS OF THE TIMES

A Superhero in a Prism, Antiheroes in Deep Focus



Andy Kubert/DC Comics

Batman has a proposal for Catwoman in Neil Gaiman and Andy Kubert's "Whatever Happened to the Caped Crusader?," which offers multiple views of its hero's mythology.

by GEORGE GENE GUSTINES
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The cartoonist Darwyn Cooke is an extraordinary talent. He had already proven himself to superhero fans with a taut psychological examination of :

1. Bruce Wayne ("Batman: Ego"), a down-and-dirty heist adventure
2. ("Catwoman: Selina's Big Score") and
3. ("The New Frontier") audacious revisionists look at the formation of the Justice League.

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Now his talents and perspective are displayed in three new publications.

- **THE HUNTER**

Adapted and illustrated by Darwyn Cooke

144 pages. IDW. \$24.99.

- **WHATEVER HAPPENED TO THE CAPED CRUSADER?**

Written by Neil Gaiman and illustrated by Andy Kubert

128 pages. DC Comics. \$24.99.

- **ASTERIOS POLYP**

Written and illustrated by David Mazzucchelli

344 pages. Pantheon. \$29.95.

Mr. Cooke has turned his eye toward the guys and dolls that make up the world of Parker, the single-named, downright criminal antihero created by Richard Stark (the novelist [Donald E. Westlake](#), using a pseudonym, who died last year). The result is a wonderfully engrossing graphic-novel adaptation of “The Hunter,” the 1962 book in which Mr. Stark introduced his frequent protagonist.

“The Hunter” is about a hijacking caper that ends poorly for Parker: not only is he double-crossed, but his wife, Lynn, is a coerced accomplice in his downfall. He’s shot and left for dead in a building set ablaze. He survives, of course, and tracks his enemies to New York City, bent on revenge. Except for omitting a scene or two involving an Upper West Side bodega, the adaptation is faithful to the novel, down to the opening and closing lines.

While the situations may be Mr. Stark’s, the stylized imagery is Mr. Cooke’s. (At this point in his career, I would happily buy his graphic adaptation of a phone book.) “The Hunter,” with a black, white and washed-green-gray palette, opens with a bravura 13-page sequence that is nearly dialogue-free. We see Parker stomp across the traffic-clogged George Washington Bridge, his effect on women (lots of blushing and preening) and his forging a driver’s license for use in a later con. The New York of 1962 appears clean, innocent and inviting, while its residents have the scrubbed look of the advertising executives, wives and mistresses of “Mad Men.” The reader is

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denied Parker's face until Page 20, when we see his visage, reflected in a mirror, smoldering with rage.

Mr. Cooke depicts his characters with such emotion and conveys so much with gesture and composition that, except for the specifics of the hijacking, you could almost follow the story by the images alone. And when the words and graphics are in harmony, the effect is deliciously brutal. When Parker confronts Lynn, she's physically and emotionally shaken by his return. She talks about her guilt regarding his "death": "If I don't take the pills, I don't sleep. I think about you and how you're dead and how I wish — I wish it was me." With steel in his eyes, Parker responds, "Take too many pills." His encouraging her to commit suicide is only one example of the ice in his heart.

"Whatever Happened to the Caped Crusader?" has morbid moments, but also bittersweet passages. Its title story, written by [Neil Gaiman](#) and illustrated by Andy Kubert, imagines several variations of Batman's death. This anthology, published by DC Comics, also includes other stories by Mr. Gaiman about the millionaire Bruce Wayne's famous alter ego. The other tales are very good, but "Whatever Happened to ..." packs enough emotional punch to stand solo.

The story is narrated posthumously by Batman (no spoilers here; it's apparent by the seventh page). It opens with Selina Kyle (Catwoman) on her way to the Dew Drop Inn, a seedy bar with a backroom. The occasion is Batman's wake, and his enemies and allies assemble to recount their versions of his passing.

The recollections of the mourners are filled with enough eye candy to satisfy even the most rabid fanboys (and fangirls), as Mr. Gaiman pays tribute to the lore of Batman by weaving in elements from his 70-year publication history.

But it wouldn't work without the artistry of Mr. Kubert, who supplies clever touches like Two-Face's car (one half is ruptured metal; the other is pristine) and captures the specific look of Batman and his supporting cast as they were drawn in the 1940s or 1960s or 1990s. (Throughout his history Batman has been rendered as both a menacing creature of the night and a benign champion of hope.) But that's just the geek icing on the cake.

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Mr. Gaiman has a gift for these time-honored characters and demonstrates his command of the villains simply by showing how they approach a parking attendant (Two-Face, confused; Catwoman, confident; the Joker, crazed).

The first part of the story focuses on Batman's relationship with Catwoman and the Joker, which is fitting, since they help express the tragedy and triumph of the hero. Catwoman represents the love he dare not allow himself, while the Joker signifies the chaos facing the world if there were no Batman.

One rooftop scene particularly resonates: "My parents were killed, too. You're not alone," Catwoman tells Batman. But he's unable to commit when she proposes marriage, and the next panel shows a solitary Dark Knight, head slouched, waiting in the night. In her version of Batman's death, she says: "You came here because you love me. And I let you die because I love you."

With his last breath, he responds, "So much to do ..."

The final words of Asterios Polyp are unknown, but they would probably be as confounding and mesmerizing as the man himself, the center of the magnificent "Asterios Polyp" by David Mazzucchelli. Most comic-book fans know Mr. Mazzucchelli as an illustrator of Batman and Daredevil. But this story, about a frustrated middle-aged architect, is no heroic adventure. It is a fictional account of a man whose hopes and failures often feel convincingly, if painfully, real.

Asterios is in a stupor and living in squalor when a freak accident (a bolt of lightning sets his New York building on fire) gets him moving. He winds up in Middle America, working at a garage. In a flashback to his previous life as a professor, Asterios delivers lines like, "I have two kinds of students: those who can't draw, and those who can't think," which sound like cocktail party quips, but we soon realize that he really means it. Asterios is smug and overbearing, a testament to how human, and gloriously flawed, Mr. Mazzucchelli's creation is.

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The duality of Asterios — smart but arrogant; admired but devoid of social skills — comes across sharply in his relationship with the artist Hana, who over the course of the book goes from girlfriend to wife to ex. Their engaging courtship gives way to tension and blunders on Asterios's part. He criticizes her salads; he refuses to check street addresses and gets them lost; he is influenced by her art but gives her no credit. The dialogue sounds so authentic that reading their conversations often feels uncomfortably like eavesdropping. The effect, like that of Mr. Mazzucchelli's diverse visual conceits and effects, is intoxicating.

“Asterios Polyp,” which took a decade for Mr. Mazzucchelli to complete, has been well worth the wait. Its ambition jump-starts the future of the graphic novel.

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