

Watchmen
(2009)

Dog carcass in alley this morning, tire tread on burst stomach. This city is afraid of me. I have seen its true face.

The streets are extended gutters and the gutters are full of blood and when the drains finally scab over, all the vermin will drown. The accumulated filth of all their sex and murder will foam up about their waists and all the whores and politicians will look up and shout "save us!" ...

...and I'll look down and whisper "no."

These are the words of a hero—indeed, perhaps, the one true hero *Watchmen* contains. Forming the graphic novel's opening monologue, they serve to establish the story's profound distinction from other superhero narratives of its time, one which has made *Watchmen* a landmark of its medium. "Rorschach" (aka Walter Kovacs) has just discovered that a former teammate has been brutally murdered, and believes a killer of costumed vigilantes is at large. The story of his investigation deconstructs heroism in a way that has haunted and inspired readers for over twenty years.

A generation after its original release, *Watchmen* remains brilliant. It is the superhero comic book for people who do not read superhero comic books, as well as those who believe that the problems of mankind have long outgrown capes and tights. The question *Watchmen* explores seems as relevant now as ever before, and has enshrined the work as a literary classic: What happens to heroes when humanity has become its own worst enemy? The answers it offers are diverse and open-ended, their implications provocative even as they delve new and thrilling depths for an often stagnant and superficial genre.

Watchmen was originally published as a twelve-part series between 1986 and 1987, the product of acclaimed writer Alan Moore and artist Dave Gibbons. Critical and financial success was immediate; it is the only comic to have won a Hugo Award (1988), and has since been the only graphic novel to appear on *Time Magazine's* list of the 100 best English-language novels since 1923. The \$120-million *Watchmen* film which opens March 6 is likely the most anticipated adaptation of its kind, and has been in some form of development since the late-eighties. Deemed at times to be unfilmable, it has been through five directors, at least four scripts, and last-minute copyright litigation which nearly postponed its release.

As with so many celebrated works of literature, *Watchmen's* strength is in its cultural pertinence. The major setting is an alternate-yet-recognizable New York City; it is 1985, the Cold War with the Soviet Union has worsened, and the Doomsday Clock is ticking down to midnight. The United States has abandoned presidential term limits—Nixon is still in office—and costumed vigilantes have been outlawed or pressed into serving their government. The team of heroes once known as the Minute Men has long disbanded, its members and their legacy existing in various states of retirement and withdrawal. Though it involves two generations and dozens of characters, *Watchmen* is essentially about five individuals—five heroes whose differing methods and intentions are purposely debatable. Though all are original creations, their resemblance to big-name superheroes is unmistakable, and allows the story to succeed at both realistic and allegorical levels.

Rorschach, whom we meet first, is the one member of the Minute Men who continues to operate outside the law. He is as obsessed as he is penniless, pilfering food from the refrigerators of his contacts by night and prophesying the End-times with signs and sandwich boards by day.

He takes his name from his mask—his true “face,” as he calls it—whose heat-sensitive latex creates the sort of inkblot-designs psychologist Hermann Rorschach pioneered for personality testing. Despite its apparent gimmickry, the mask’s material was furnished by an infamous historical event—the murder of Katherine Genovese in 1964—and symbolizes the so-called “bystander-effect” which sees witnesses to crime refuse to intervene. The mask’s black-and-white patterns reflect Rorschach’s uncompromising outlook, and strike a hard contrast with the grimy trench coats and fedoras Rorschach otherwise wears.

The character is almost thoroughly bipolar. At once an existentialist and moral absolutist, he exemplifies the collision of heroic intentions with the hellish realities of crime. His portrayal addresses the reason comic-book villains have usually been bankrobbers and builders of city-stomping robots; homicide detectives and child-porn investigators know it must be easy to keep a noble perspective when evildoing is limited to these things. Rorschach’s experience with suffering and malfeasance is indescribably horrible, so it is both fitting and ironic that his dedication to justice poses the one sublime element of *Watchman*’s secularity.

Perhaps the novel’s most emblematic figure is Dr. Jonathan Osterman, or “Dr. Manhattan,” a naked, blue-skinned, and near-omnipotent entity whose powers serve only to estrange him from humankind. The victim of a fortunate accident with nuclear energy, Dr. Manhattan works for the United States government, having participated in the Vietnam War and now conducting top-secret research into the nature of matter itself. The American media call him “our superman,” and his portrayal explores the cultural and psychological consequences of a superman’s existence in a way that is sensitive and credible.

Stories of superheroes have asserted *ad nauseam* that the inheritance of great power necessitates an immediate and endearing responsibility to the downtrodden, something which Dr. Manhattan appears to honour at the beginning of his career. Eventually, however, the character’s fascination with his own potential is corroborated by the increasing distrust and envy of the masses. His connection with humanity weakens as his god-like superiority becomes clear, and increasingly he looks upon his involvement in human affairs as a waste of time rather than an obligation. As with Rorschach, it represents an indictment of heroic simplicity—even so, Doctor Manhattan’s part in the conclusion of *Watchmen* is by no means indifferent.

The true genius of the Minute Men—and of *Watchmen* itself—lies in the character of Adrian Veidt, formerly known as Ozymandias. Having bent his brilliant mind from crime-fighting to capitalism, he has become rich promoting his own image, and markets everything from action figures to perfumes. Now the head of a major corporation, he is the much-idealized benevolent dictator, a hero who fashions himself after ancient rulers and conquerors, and who is certain he knows what’s best for those he watches over.

Among *Watchmen*’s other central characters are the recently-deceased Comedian (the bad good guy), Nite Owl (effectively Batman gone to seed), and the (second) Silk Spectre, who is the daughter of two former Minute Men. All have their agendas as well as their failings, and all are entangled in the same, elaborate web Rorschach first seeks to unweave. The end of their story is wrenching, one which distinguishes heroes from heroism, and the intentions of do-gooders from the consequences of their actions.

It is difficult to overstate the influence *Watchmen* has had on comics and superheroes. Along with Frank Miller’s gritty portrayal of Batman in *The Dark Knight Returns* (1986) and *Batman: Year One* (1987), *Watchmen* is credited with instituting the dreary, violent, and self-absorbed champions we see today, and in turn making hokum of Superman, Wonder Woman, and Captain America. Its unflinchingly realistic mode of storytelling seems to have superseded

the more mythic representations of super-powered individuals, a legacy neither critics nor the creators of *Watchmen* themselves have always welcomed. Though the story examines the motivations and practices of heroes, it does not invalidate them; Gibbons has said that while some readers may have been left with a grim impression, the work is “a wonderful celebration of superheroes as much as anything else.”

For good or ill, our superheroes are now darker than ever, and *Watchmen* will serve to show new audiences where they started to cloud over. It is important to recognize, however, that the story is not without the hope its many pretenders seem to prune, and that the luxury of despair is something the Cold War Era could not afford. Even as Rorschach stands derelict, his commentary lies bright atop the darkness of the illustrated panels, and speaks to something he serves that is greater than himself. “Never despair. Never surrender,” he urges. “Never compromise. Not even in the face of Armageddon.”

The story of *Watchmen* is a story about people, as Alan Moore has said. Each of its characters has something to live for and to champion. What the story asks of its audience is whether any of them deserve to be called heroes, and what that assessment reflects of we who would be saved.

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