Watchmen

Author: Moore, Alan
Artist: Dave Gibbons (illustrator); John B. Higgins (colorist)
Publisher: DC Comics
First serial publication: 1986-1987
First book publication: 1987

Publication History
Charlton Comics was acquired in 1985 by DC Comics, which had already purchased most of Charlton’s superheroes. Before these were used by DC, Alan Moore hoped to use them in a limited series. Editor Dick Giordano persuaded him to create an original story instead, but parallels remain between some Charlton superheroes and those depicted in Watchmen. Dave Gibbons contacted Moore upon hearing about his project, and once approved, Gibbons added colorist John Higgins to the team. Moore and Gibbons contracted for a twelve-issue limited series with DC. The first issue appeared in September, 1986, and although the plan was to publish on a monthly schedule, the amount of detail involved in the story and its art delayed production; the twelfth issue appeared in October, 1987. The original team completed the project, but Gibbons’s wife and son later aided in drawing panel grids, and Moore asked writer Neil Gaiman to help with research. The first issue was rereleased, with the original cover price, in December, 2008, three months before the theatrical release of the film adaptation.

DC Comics collected the twelve issues of Watchmen as a trade paperback late in 1987; near the same time, Graphitti Designs published a slipcase hardcover edition that added forty-eight pages of related material, including Gibbons’s early sketches and Moore’s proposal. The trade paperback and the Graphitti Designs edition preserved the original size of the original comic book format, while Absolute Watchmen (2005) presented a slipcase, oversize version consistent with DC Comics’ Absolute Edition format. This book also included the supplemental material found in the Graphitti Designs edition.

Plot
Watchmen comes from the decade when mainstream comics welcomed mature themes and revisionist approaches. In presenting a world where superheroes are real, Moore creates an alternate history in which the United States won the Vietnam War, the Watergate...
scandal never broke and Richard M. Nixon is still president, and electric cars have replaced gasoline-powered vehicles.

The story begins in New York City in October of 1985. Investigating a murder, Rorschach learns the victim was another masked hero called the Comedian. Certain the murderer is targeting costumed vigilantes, Rorschach warns his fellow superheroes, who are skeptical. The second Silk Spectre, Laurie Juspeczyk, leaves her increasingly distant lover, Dr. Manhattan, who teleports to Mars after being accused of giving his friends cancer. This creates a crisis for the government that relied on him as its chief nuclear deterrent. Another former hero, Ozymandias, is attacked, and Rorschach learns about a secret plan the Comedian had uncovered. Revisiting his informant’s home, Rorschach is arrested and imprisoned.

Laurie moves in with Dan Dreiberg, the second Nite Owl. After donning their costumes to save people from a tenement fire, they release Rorschach from prison and return to Dan’s home, where Dr. Manhattan awaits them. He takes Laurie to Mars, where she persuades him to try to save the world from nuclear war, while Dan and Rorschach learn that Ozymandias is behind the secret plan the Comedian had investigated, part of which involved removing Dr. Manhattan from the picture. They confront Ozymandias in his Antarctic fortress but are easily subdued. He explains that he has created an enormous monster, whose teleportation into New York City and attendant psychic disturbance would kill millions but unite a human race on the edge of annihilation against the perceived alien threat. Ozymandias cannot subdue Dr. Manhattan but persuades him not to reveal the plan. After killing Rorschach, who refuses to comply, Dr. Manhattan leaves Earth again, and Dan and Laurie assume new identities and start a life on the run. The novel ends ambiguously: Before leaving New York, Rorschach mailed his journal to a right-wing magazine, and the last panel makes it unclear whether they will publish it and thus unveil Ozymandias’s conspiracy.

Throughout the main narrative are documentary materials and the flashbacks enhance readers’ understanding of the historically altered world of Watchmen and its superheroes. Through these, readers learn about the origins of masked crime fighters before World War II and how they banded together briefly; a first-generation hero’s futile efforts in 1966 to create another team; the involvement of Dr. Manhattan and the Comedian in Vietnam; the backlash against superheroes in 1977 that drove most of them into retirement; and the details of Ozymandias’s plan. The pirate comic also is connected tangentially to Ozymandias’s plot and offers narrative and visual parallels to the main story.

Characters
- Rorschach, a.k.a. Walter Kovacs, wears padded shoes, a soiled suit, overcoat, scarf, gloves, hat, and a white mask with shifting, symmetrical black patterns. He is a paranoid loner with a morally absolute worldview. His investigations involve other superheroes in discovering and resisting Ozymandias’s plan.
- Nite Owl, a.k.a. Dan Dreiberg, wears glasses and has developed a paunch in middle age. His brown and gray costume suggests an owl and includes a yellow utility belt and goggles. Scholarly and shy, he becomes bolder as Nite Owl. He frees Rorschach from prison, helps him solve the mystery behind Ozymandias’s plot, and takes them to Ozymandias’s Antarctic fortress.
- Ozymandias, a.k.a. Adrian Veidt, is blond, handsome, and fit. His costume is a purple mask, tunic, and boots with reflective gold leggings, shirt, and trim. Called the smartest man in the world, he is humble in public but is extremely confident. Seen first at the margins of the mystery, he is actually a murderer and mastermind.
- Dr. Manhattan, a.k.a. Jon Osterman, re-creates himself as hairless and blue after a laboratory accident. He later burns a symbol of a hydrogen atom into his forehead. Over time his costume reduces from full body to nothing. The only superhero with superpowers, he can manipulate matter and teleport and can increase his own size and duplicate himself. He also experiences all
time simultaneously. Ozymandias manipulates Dr. Manhattan, America’s superweapon, into leaving Earth so he can enact his plan to bring world peace.

- **Silk Spectre**, a.k.a. **Laurie Juspeczyk**, is an attractive brunette who reluctantly inherited her mother’s identity. She inspires Dan to resume as Nite Owl, helps him free Rorschach, then is taken to Mars by Dr. Manhattan. She persuades him to return to Earth. She, like Dr. Manhattan and Dan, is persuaded not to interfere with Ozymandias’s plan.

- **The Comedian**, a.k.a. **Edward Blake**, first wears a yellow union suit with purple mask and trim, then body armor and a mask with flag-style epaulets. His face was scarred by his mistress in Vietnam, after which he wears a full leather mask. He is arrogant and cynical. He learns Ozymandias’s plan, and his murder begins Rorschach’s investigations.

**Artistic Style**

Dave Gibbons penciled, inked, and lettered *Watchmen*; the colorist was John Higgins. The art, typical for Gibbons, is realistic and cleanly rendered but detailed. Realism is also used in the documentary materials, and the colors are realistic as well. These choices reinforce Moore’s realistic approach to superheroes. Gibbons’s grid pattern is consistent throughout the book, with some size variations for different effects. This helps draw readers evenly through the narrative, allowing them to focus more on the story and its layers of supporting details.

The twelve covers of the original limited series, expanded selections from a panel on the first page of that issue or related to such an image, were preserved as chapter headings in the book. The book has had two covers. The 1987 trade paperback features an original image depicting the view from the Comedian’s window right after Ozymandias throws him through it. Subsequent editions have been a close-up of the Comedian’s bloodstained smiley-face badge, the iconic features of which appear throughout the book.

*Watchmen* uses speech bubbles for dialogue, with altered bubbles for Dr. Manhattan and Rorschach after their respective transformations. It does not use verbal sound effects or bubbles for characters’ thoughts; instead, thoughts are rendered as interior monologues within the panel. These interior panels are also used for some dialogue, excerpts from characters’ writings, and the narration in the pirate comic. Often, such texts are juxtaposed with dialogue or with contrasting actions, contributing to the novel’s use of irony and intertextuality.

**Themes**

Conflict is a major theme of *Watchmen*—among and within nations and individuals. The Cold War climate of its plot, reflecting the time in which it was published, is one of tension and fear. Conflict occurs at personal, familial, romantic, social, and political levels. Yet love is also a theme in *Watchmen*. The course of romantic love does not always run smooth here, but in some ways the novel is as much a love story between Dan and Laurie as a superhero mystery story. There is also a surprising love story between Laurie’s parents, and by novel’s end her feelings toward them have improved. Love between friends also figures prominently. The accusation that Dr. Manhattan has given his former associates cancer distresses him, and at the end Laurie convinces him that people are worth caring about. There are also the motivations of the superheroes themselves. Although these are varied and complex, part of what drives most of them is a desire to help people. However, they are human themselves, and human fallibility and frailty are significant themes as well.

Conflict often emerges over issues of power, law, and justice. Rorschach believes in absolute standards of right and wrong. Ironically, a similar belief in the absence of transcendent moral values underlies the amorality of the Comedian and to some extent Dr. Manhattan. Ozymandias rejects conventional morality too, even while attempting to serve the greater good as he sees it. All are willing to break the law and to kill—Rorschach and Ozymandias because of their beliefs, the Comedian and Dr. Manhattan because of their lack of them. The other superheroes, although their motivations may be mixed, subscribe to more traditional notions of right and wrong, even while acting as unlicensed vigilantes.
Implicit in the superhero concept is the issue of law versus justice. Superheroes act as de facto law officers but operate outside the law. In *Watchmen*, eventually such actions are declared illegal, with most superheroes retiring, the Comedian and Dr. Manhattan working as government operatives, and Rorschach refusing to stop. In effect, the activities of superheroes address matters of civil obedience and disobedience: does doing the right thing sometimes mean breaking the law? Moore’s treatment of this, even more than with earlier comics in which superheroes are presented as flawed people with real problems, is nuanced and complex.

**Impact**

With Art Spiegelman’s *Maus* (1986) and Frank Miller’s *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* (1986), *Watchmen* was one of three graphic novels of the 1980’s that brought the form mainstream attention and a realization outside the comics field that they were capable of sophisticated storytelling for a mature audience—even if superheroes were the characters. Such efforts were part of a larger trend with publishers such as Marvel and DC toward mature subject matter, experimentation and revisionism, and greater artistic freedom and recognition.

*Watchmen* clearly relates to the broader history of superhero comics. In addition to certain characters being modeled on Charlton superheroes, the Minutemen, who preceded the Watchmen, resemble Golden Age superheroes of the 1940’s. In costuming, such similarities include union suits (the Comedian), scantily clad female crime fighters (Silk Spectre, whose name even evokes the Golden Age heroine Phantom Lady), domino masks, capes, and even crime fighters in shorts (Nite Owl). Names are another similarity, with Captain Metropolis being the clearest example. Also, although Moore shows that these characters were hardly innocents, their activities are generally lighter in tone than those of the next generation of heroes, reflecting differences between Golden Age superheroes and their Silver Age and Bronze Age counterparts, even when these heroes are fighting Nazis, as shown with Nite Owl.

In contrast, the next generation of superheroes has more in common with the costuming and names of American superheroes after the Golden Age, when it was not unusual for superheroes to be feared rather than revered, which is what ultimately happens with most second-generation heroes in *Watchmen*. In particular, the 1970’s measure in *Watchmen* to control superhero activity echoes earlier story lines in the *X-Men* comics and anticipates later works such as Mark Millar’s *Civil War* (2006-2007). Also, Dr. Manhattan’s origin is reminiscent of the origins of many Silver Age superheroes who acquire their powers through scientific mishaps, and his connections to nuclear energy evoke the frequent references to atomic power and its possible consequences in the Silver Age.

*Watchmen* has been credited with helping to inspire not only a greater level of realism in superhero comics but also greater violence. This, along with the novel’s sexual content, led some critics to decry a loss of innocence in superhero comics, and later some writers deliberately strove to restore the genre to its former status in response to works such as *Watchmen*.

Within Moore’s career, *Watchmen* solidified his reputation as one of the major authors in the field. However, his relationship with DC Comics soured soon after, and he has distanced himself from the book and refused to allow his name to appear in the credits of the film adaptations. He continued to write superhero comics following *Watchmen* but mostly turned his talents to revisionist takes on literary history such as his *League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* series and *Lost Girls*.

From its initial publication as a limited series, *Watchmen* has been recognized as an outstanding contribution to both superhero comics and the graphic novel as an artistic form. In addition to the many awards it received, it was praised in mainstream media outlets as early as 1988, and in 2005 it was the only graphic novel to appear on *Time*’s “100 Greatest Novels” list. Some have argued that its reputation is exaggerated, and it has been parodied in online videos, the comic book *Watchmensch* (2009), and in *The Simpsons* episode “Husbands and Knives” (2007). Nonetheless, it remains one of the most frequently praised and discussed graphic novels in the history of the medium and is the subject of significant scholarly study.

*Darren Harris-Fain*
**Films**
*Watchmen*. Directed by Zack Snyder. Warner Bros., 2009. This adaptation stars Malin Akerman as Laurie Jupiter (Juspeczyk), Billy Crudup as Dr. Manhattan, Matthew Goode as Ozymandias, Jackie Earle Haley as Rorschach, Jeffrey Dean Morgan as the Comedian, and Patrick Wilson as Dan Dreiberg. Moore refused to be associated with the project, and his name does not appear in the credits. Dave Gibbons served as an adviser to the production. There are some minor differences, but otherwise the film is extremely faithful to the novel, with one major exception: Here, Ozymandias’s plan is to avert the threat of nuclear war not with a faked alien invasion but by destroying major cities with reactors created by him and Dr. Manhattan, with Dr. Manhattan becoming the common enemy against which humanity rallies. Critical opinion was divided. Its admirers appreciated its general fidelity to the graphic novel and the fact that it was more sophisticated than most superhero films.

**Further Readings**

**Bibliography**

**See also:** *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns; Batman: The Killing Joke; Batman: Arkham Asylum; Kingdom Come*