Review of:


by James R. Fleming

1. In How to Read Superhero Comics and Why, Geoff Klock undertakes the rather bold task of proposing a theory as to how the third generation of superhero narratives have arisen in response to what he sees as being the overpowering influence of Frank Miller’s Batman: The Dark Knight Returns and Alan Moore’s Watchmen, both of which, Klock insists, “represent the culmination of the silver age” and have given rise to the pronounced element of “self-consciousness in the superhero narrative” (3) that typifies what he considers to be the strongest works of the new age of superhero narratives.

2. Klock draws heavily from Harold Bloom’s anxiety of influence theory of poetics to argue that post-silver age superhero narratives “find themselves too hampered by the influence, and burden, of The Dark Knight Returns and Watchmen” (3). According to Klock, such ultra-violent late-80s and early-90s popular “superheroes” of the “dark age” of superhero narratives as Marvel’s Wolverine, Venom, and Cable, and Image’s Spawn and Prophet, are, at least in Bloomian terms, ultimately weak misreadings of The Dark Knight Returns and Watchmen for “what superhero narratives leaned from the success of [The Dark Knight Returns and Watchmen] was that the market was interested in a much higher level
of violence and sex than the industry produced at the time” (80). Employing the sort of critical terminology and paradigms that sends even those of us familiar with the jargon of contemporary critical theory in search of our new rather outdated copies of M.H. Abram’s *Glossary of Literary Terms* for further clarifications, Klock asserts that the strong successors to the silver-age brand of popular superhero narratives can be located, quite specifically, in such contemporary revisionary superhero narratives as Wildstorm’s *The Authority, Wildcats* and, in particular, *Planetary*, a book which, as he contends, readily investigates and interrogates matters of “fiction through fiction” (154) and attempts, quite consciously, “to uncover the ‘bronze age,’ the successor to the gold and silver ages of the superhero” and engage in a sort of textual combat to “determine the shape of the superhero to come, the future of the superhero narrative” (154) throughout its story lines.

3. Klock tends to be at his best, and least hyper-theoretical and abstract, when working exclusively with *The Dark Knight Returns* and *Watchmen*. Klock’s insights into these texts are often interesting and, at various points, downright enlightening, leaving me wishing that he had focused his study entirely around these two texts, if even for the express purpose of demonstrating how superhero narratives (and comic books at large) can and deserve to be read in the same critical manner in which we (or at least those of us with an inclination towards literary and cultural theory) tend to read supposed high literature.

4. Klock’s reading of *The Dark Knight Returns* demonstrates not only a keen comprehension of the text (one of the most inspired and comprehensive that I have seen, in fact), but also a strong sense of the complexities and contradictions of the history and mythos of the characters with which the text is forced to contend. Klock argues that *The Dark Knight Returns* is “the first work in the history of superhero comics that attempts a synthesis of forty-five years of preceding Batman history in one place” (27) as well as “the fons et origo (the fountainhead and the origin) of the revisionary superhero narrative” (47). What is especially remarkable about *The Dark Knight Returns*, as Klock insists, is the fact that Miller addresses Batman’s contradictory portrayal over the years and “tries to compose a story that makes sense of its history, rather than mechanically adding another story to the Batman folklore” (28). Miller does this, in large part, by incorporating most every major aspect of the Batman mythos that the reader might be familiar with into the narrative without making the book, at least overtly, *about* the history of the character. What Miller does in *The Dark Knight Returns*, Klock contends, “can be located near Harold Bloom’s concept of revisionary literature, which Bloom describes as ‘a re-aiming or a looking-over-again, leading to a re-esteeeming or re-estimating’ (28) of the mythos of the character. Klock addresses the “extreme level of violence” and realism that is presented throughout *The Dark Knight Returns* by arguing that “[w]ith *The Dark Knight Returns*, the reader is forced to confront what has been going on for years between the panels” (30). As Klock points out, in Miller’s vision of Batman, the character fights in a downright brutal manner and is almost always presented in a state of disrepair. Miller does not let his Batman get away with just knocking around street thugs and costumed psychopaths and simply dusting his hands and winking at the reader. “The strength of Miller’s portrayal leaves readers with the impression that all of Batman’s fights have been of this kind,” (31) and that they have previously only
read “watered-down” versions of what actually occurred, which positions Miller’s vision of Batman as offering a peek into the true story of what has actually happened across the span of the character’s entire history, in turn “making all other readings appear to have ‘fallen away’ from the strongest version that is retroactively constituted as always already true” (31).

5. Klock makes great critical use of Alan Moore’s Watchmen as well, recognizing what the prime differences ultimately are between it and The Dark Knight Returns. “Moore takes on a more complex job than Miller. Watchmen is an attempt to make sense of superhero history in all its varied aspects rather than synthesize the history of a single character” (65). Unlike Miller, Klock contends, Moore deconstructs the very nature of the superhero archetype, “send[ing] a wave of disruption back through superhero history by asking, for example, what would make a person dress up in a costume and fight crime?” (63) Moore, Klock further argues, “devalues one of the basic superhero conventions” (63) by placing his heroes in a starkly realistic world in which super-powered beings end elements of the fantastic do not, for the most part, exist, unlike Miller, “whose moody shadows, reminiscent of film noir, are very romantic and invoke a world as tough and gritty as it is operatic” (65). Moore’s heroes, though based on firmly established superhero archetypes (though Klock does not seem to realize that Moore’s Watchmen were based on Charlton characters and not directly on D.C.’s original Justice League), “shed light on established heroes by invoking certain archetypal comic book signifiers [that are] common to the revisionary superhero narrative’s investigation of its own history” (66). And that’s exactly what Klock figures Watchmen mainly to be, an investigation into the histories of the superhero narrative, an exploration that all the while raises numerous questions about the various histories that it absorbs along the way.

6. What both Watchmen and The Dark Knight Returns ultimately share in common, Klock insists, raising what is perhaps the most questionable point in the book pertaining to the relationship between these particular works and the superhero narratives that follow them, is the manner in which they both “return superheroes to their pulp roots, to darkness and ambiguity . . . never again will the superhero narrative be able to return to the simplicity from which it came without coming to terms with Watchmen and The Dark Knight Returns” (76). Though I do not wholly question Klock’s positioning of both Watchmen and The Dark Knight Returns as strong texts with which the next generation of superhero narratives have been forced to contend, I do doubt the validity of his implicit insistence that they are the only strong influences from the late-silver age to which post-silver age superhero narratives have had to reconcile themselves. Klock all but ignores the various properties from Marvel Comics in his consideration of the “strong books” of the late-silver age, giving no attention to the influence of, to provide only two obvious examples, Chris Claremont’s remarkable and highly influential work on The Uncanny X-Men from the late-70s through early-90s, or Frank Miller’s own work on Daredevil in the early 80s.

7. By focusing almost entirely on how two very particular late silver-age narratives have influenced and shaped contemporary, post-silver age superhero narratives, Klock makes the mistake of conceiving of the various “ages” of superhero narratives and their influences upon the following generations as being a clean and continuous process (a manner in which history, as Foucault, among many others,
reminds us, simply does not operate), with each age leading directly into the one that most directly follows it. Klock also seems to conceive of superhero narratives as being created and read in a virtual vacuum without any influence coming from outside their own genre.

8. Klock ultimately fails to deliver on what his title, perhaps unreasonably, promises. He does not succeed in providing us with a way to “read” superhero comics nor does he attempt to even offer an attack on the notion of there actually being a way, per se, to go about reading them. For that matter, he does not even provide us with a sufficient method with which to read and consider post-silver age and high-postmodern, revisionary superhero narratives. He simply suggests something of a method, and a fairly limited one at that (particularly for those outside of the academy), by which we might begin to consider how certain post-silver age superhero narratives have, quite consciously, responded to their immediate, strong late-silver age precursors. Furthermore, Klock does not provide us with much of a reason as to why we should actually read and grant these books critical attention, aside from joining him in the task of attempting to chart the influences of one highly particular set of superhero narratives upon another highly particular set that immediately follows them.

© 2005 James Fleming (all rights reserved). This essay is the intellectual property of the author and cannot be printed or distributed without the author's express written permission other than excerpts for purposes consistent with Fair Use doctrine. The layout and design of this article is © 2004 ImageTexT (all rights reserved) and cannot be reproduced without the express written permission of the editor.