

REVIEW: *BATMAN: SUPERHEAVY* BY SNYDER, CAPULLO, AND MIKI

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Introduction

Writer Scott Snyder frequently used his work on mainline *Batman* books to wrestle with whether Batman is a necessary hero as well as the potential value, or lack thereof, in generating new Batman stories. In his *Superheavy* (2016) storyline for *Batman*, Snyder collaborated with artists Greg Capullo and Jock, the artist, in order to develop a narrative that focused on questions of how an affluent, white, male superhero might ethically operate while still recognizing that his privilege influences his view of justice. Publisher DC Comics also credited inker Danny Miki as a top billed creator on the cover of their trade paperback collection of the *Superheavy* story. The following essay will review *Batman: Superheavy* (2016) – henceforth abbreviated as merely *Superheavy* – with special attention to the ethical concerns of the authors in creating the story.

Batman, But Not Batman

Snyder and team’s timely interests in how a character like Batman may respond to social phenomena such #blacklivesmatter, which calls Batman’s authoritarian justice into question, was their solution to potentially waning utility in contemporary iterations of the Batman myth. The *Superheavy* authors were faced with

distancing themselves in a Batman lineage as well. Where does the myth evolve after the modernist, lone hero of Frank Miller or the post-modern absurdities of Grant Morrison’s super-dad figure? Snyder’s Batman now grapples with both the benefits and detriments of modernity and post-modernity simultaneously – a grappling which is usually tackled under the lens of identity considerations. Particularly, Snyder’s Batman faces the narrative abyss of post-modern destabilization of personal identity while simultaneously working to avoid becoming a mere culmination of a rigid identity marker check-list (Hammonds, 2017).

Toward the end of exploring Batman’s identity, Snyder and team decided to take their inquiry of the character an additional step forward in *Superheavy* by asking, “What does Batman mean as an icon to contemporary audiences?” *Superheavy* picks up after a storyline called *Endgame* (Snyder, et al, 2015) in which the Bruce Wayne iteration of Batman has been supposedly killed in a showdown with the Joker. While the tactic of “killing” Bruce Wayne felt admittedly cliché and kitsch at first, the events of *Endgame* did eventually open up possibilities for future stories to probe whether “Batman” means “Bruce Wayne” or whether other readings of “Batman” may be valuable as well. The entirety of *Superheavy* is framed as a probing mechanism regarding

the meaning of the Bat Symbol, as communicated by Capullo and Miki's opening panels of the story. These panels "zoom out" of a close-up of the Bat Signal to reveal a multitude of symbols shining in the night sky over the people of fictional Gotham City. Snyder's commentary over these images emphasized the story focus on the meaning and value of the Bat Symbol, including references to various prior versions of Batman (e.g., explicating the jingle associated with Adam West's 1960s portrayal of the character). The lines of Snyder's script operate to clarify that the plethora of Bat Signals in the sky referenced the many Batmen associated with the symbol.

As a continuation of this theme, *Superheavy* began with the Gotham City Police Department (GCPD) opting to launch a program in which technically advanced anonymous police officers would be sent into the field under the guise of the Bat Symbol. The GCPD's choice for the first new "Batman" was none other the long-standing character, Commissioner Jim Gordon. Gordon's response to the proposal that he may become Batman was similar to the initial, true-life responses of some fans: Hesitation. Fortunately for Snyder and team, audiences seemed to warm up to Gordon-Batman by the end of their story. Placing Gordon in the role of Batman strikes this reviewer as a fascinating narrative move *because* it is so jarring – it begs the question of whether other people can wear the mantle of Batman, and why.

The most potentially interesting meta-commentary on the story from Snyder comes in the form of a conversation between

his characters Jim Gordon and Harvey Bullock. After Gordon mentioned to Bullock that he was being considered for a position as a Police-Batman, Bullock argued that Jim couldn't be Batman because "he's police." Jim responded, "You've never wondered? Whether he'd have been more effective if he'd worked within the law, not outside it?" The whole book contends with this line of questioning.

Seeds of Evil: The Power Monster

After being dubbed "Batman" and being given a robotic exoskeleton, Gordon started taking to the streets and fighting bad guys (kind of). His first "super villain" was a monster whose body was made up entirely of electrical energy. The monster generically attacked blocks of Gotham and wreaked abstract mayhem. Gordon's investigation led him to discover that the large energy creature was being generated and controlled by a human with a telekinetic ability to manipulate power. The discovery that "the [power] monster is an extension of a particular criminal" who hid while making attacks served as an initial arm in an argument that Snyder wove throughout the entirety of *Superheavy*. In particular, the lesson that Gordon learns in this segment is that those who are monstrous because of the ways that they wield their power are also dangerous because they can cloak their vulnerable true identity and attack from afar. Gordon's lesson may also be intended for Snyder's readers: One way to place an ethical check on possible abuses of power is to be as transparent as possible in its use.

Snyder realized that Gordon's anonymity as Batman was contrary to the lesson of the power monster, though. Untangling this dilemma for Gordon takes more than just the *Superheavy* story (see: *Bloom*, 2016 for the follow-up narrative), but answers were hinted at in *Superheavy* when Gordon finally tracked down the man behind the "power monster." The villain had taken a hostage, who questioned the motives of his captor. As the captor attempted to murder Gordon-Batman, the villain said, "... and now, down with false idols," undoubtedly referring to Batman as an iconic figure. The hostage interjected, "False idols? At least he's trying to do something good. Look at you... You're a disgrace." After he was rescued, the hostage acknowledged Gordon as a legitimate Batman, confirming the hostage's (and Snyder's) belief that – while the question of anonymously wielding power was still problematic for Gordon – "Batman" is less the identity of a particular man in a mask than a set of heroic ideas to which one may aspire.

Seeds of Evil: The Earth Monster

Following his defeat of the power monster, Gordon encounters a creature made out of earthen elements. As with the power monster, the earth monster is controlled from afar by the leader of local Gotham gang using a combination of technology and telekinesis. Gordon found the earth monster in a Gotham neighborhood called the Narrows "Gotham's poorest neighborhood." Gordon-Batman noted that people from the Narrows had "been let down over and over

by the mechanism put in place to protect [them]." His role with the police was problematized by his realization that he served as "an extension of the very system that's failed [the people of the Narrows]."

The philosophical lessons for Gordon regarding the earth monster stem from the make-up of the monster: The elements of Gotham – brick, stone, tar, etc. – were turned upon the people in authority. The city itself had been weaponized. Gordon learned that when the elements – likely a metaphor for the people of Gotham – held together by a structure turn against it, perhaps those reinforcing the structure should reevaluate its appropriateness as a fit for the elemental contents. Although Gordon was eventually able to outsmart and defeat the man causing mass destruction with the earth of Gotham, the questions raised by the experience stay with him and influence his later decisions in the story.

Shortly after the conflict with the earth monster, Gordon sought out a newly resurgent Bruce Wayne, who had lost his memory of his life as Batman. Wayne was working as a facility manager at a recreation center in the the Narrows. Gordon's purpose in visiting Wayne was to ask him about developing new technology for "Batman" that might give him an edge over his adversaries. As is revealed through conversational meta-commentary, in Gordon's (and, probably Snyder's) estimation, Bruce Wayne is key to the Batman myth because he represents inventiveness and mutation. Indeed, communication scholar Will Brooker (2000/2005) concluded, like Snyder, that the Batman myth survives because the character

has a small handful of fixed identity markers with significant room for narrative permutations within the boundaries of those markers. Given this understanding of the character, Snyder used *Superheavy* to ask what permutations of the character will render him relevant enough to survive. The clearest answer that the audience receives from Snyder – at least in *Superheavy* – came in the form of a flashback to Bruce Wayne’s days as Batman. This flashback/subplot, functioning as a sort of interlude in the midst of *Superheavy*, offered an example of how Batman might better use his privilege and power to collaborate with communities than he has in the past.

Seeds of Renewal: Visual Dialogic Communication

During his investigation of the earth monster, Gordon discovered that the new super villains were gaining their abilities from small digital implants in their bodies that took on the appearance of seeds. The investigation led Gordon to find that there was a weapons dealer in Gotham who traded in these seeds, which endowed their users with super powers, for favors. No identifying information was available for the seed-dealer aside from the moniker “Mr. Bloom.”

In an attempt to protect his criminal enterprise, the crime boss known as the Penguin met with Mr. Bloom – and, ultimately, shot Bloom in the head. Bloom immediately revived, though, and overpowered the Penguin and his gang. Gotham’s newest villain was a weed who could not be killed by hacking away at the

surface. The Penguin/Bloom encounter continued a string of Biblical allusions across Snyder’s work on Batman, this time recalling the message that evil cannot drive out evil (Matt. 12: 25-26). There is a sense that Christian ethics are at work for Snyder in his telling of Batman stories.

To a degree, the *Superheavy* interlude – originally featured in *Batman #44* during Fall 2015 – reinforces the aforementioned ethic by functioning as a parable. Parables, of course, are narratives that are examples to communicate broader lessons, usually about moral concerns. The parabolic function of the story seems to have been on the forefront of Snyder’s mind when writing this subplot, because he commented to *The Guardian* that “If we were going to do an issue that dealt with potent problems that people face in cities that are reflected fictitiously in Gotham, then we want to really put our money where our mouth was and explore something that’s extremely resonant right now” (Ackerman, 2015). In this case, the resonant issue was the potential pitfalls of Batman’s methodology – and, the methods of other authorities in large social systems – in the “war on crime.”

Batman #44 starts with Batman and Gordon discussing the death of a black teen named Peter Duggio. Duggio had been shot and his body had been somehow mutated, but Batman determined that his death had ultimately been caused by a great fall. Batman uncovered that Duggio’s father had owned a local bodega; but, with his dad being injured during earlier story events, Duggio was effectively the manager of the bodega. In an effort to develop “more desirable” properties for wealthier citizens,

the bank sought to buy Duggio's bodega from him. He, quite naturally, did not want to be driven from his home.

In order to keep his dad's business up and running, Duggio considered letting local gangs utilize the bodega as a headquarters. However, his brother had been killed while acting on his responsibilities as a member of a gang called the Four Fives. In order to avoid business with the Four Fives, Duggio offered partnership to the Penguin's gang. The Penguin, trying to make peace and end an ongoing rivalry with the Four Fives, made the deal with Duggio and then turned around and gave the bodega to the Four Fives as an olive branch.

As Batman was uncovering various parts of this story, he encountered a group of black teens late at night in the Narrows. His response was to assume that they were likely gang members, up to no good on the streets. He scared them away from the Narrows.

Batman's inquiry led him to discover that Duggio, understandably scared, hurt, and angry at the sudden arrival of the Four Fives in his home, had attempted to fight off members of the gang. In the conflict, a fire was started which destroyed the bodega. Police arrived when they received reports of gang violence in the area. The first officer on the scene – a white man named Ned Howler – saw Duggio fleeing the chaos and shot him. During the shootout, artist Jock obviously drew on imagery associated with the shooting and murder of Trayvon Martin, which occurred toward the beginning of Snyder's work on *Batman*. The influence of the event is evident in Snyder's writing and, in this case, with his collaboration with Jock.

Duggio had attempted to save the bodega without doing business with the Penguin, though. Duggio's plight inspired him to seek out Bruce Wayne. In this section of the story, Snyder tackles the claims of some Batman fans (and/or critics) that Bruce Wayne and his economic advantages may be of more help to Gotham City than his work as Batman. There may be some truth in such criticism; however, Snyder's parable points out some flaws with oversimplifying the ways in which Bruce Wayne might act in the city's economy. For instance, Wayne himself was the proprietor of the development project driving people like Duggio and his neighbors out of their homes. The young man tried to contact Wayne with a plea to stop the development project, but to no avail. When Duggio could not reach Bruce Wayne, felt the bank closing in on him, and realized that the Penguin had given his bodega to the Four Fives, his final effort to take back control in his life was to seek out superpowers in order to be like his hero, Batman.

Duggio's search for power led him to "the man waiting at the end of the alley" – Mr. Bloom – who sold him a seed of power. After being shot by Howler, Duggio used the seed and concentrated on being like his hero. He grew wings like a bat and flew away from Howler. Duggio's injured body could not sustain the powers of the seed, though, and he fell from the sky to his death.

As Greg Capullo was on sabbatical from *Batman* to pursue other projects, Snyder teamed with Jock to draw *Batman* #44. Jock's art was effective as a jarring change from Capullo's typically sleek character designs. In contrast, Jock used highly iconic

drawings to increase reader identification while also designing jagged environments to insinuate danger and tension (McCloud, 1994). Jock's art was important for this particular issue because it implied the seriousness of the story's stakes while at the same time inviting audience participation and reflection.

The culmination of *Batman* #44 came when Batman, having concluded his investigation of Duggio's death, came across a group of black teens in the Narrows – presumably the same group that he had frightened away earlier in the story. Instead of provoking the teens with fists and fright, Batman tells the teens, “Talk to me.” In this way, Snyder communicated his suggestion for white people with power and privilege when they encounter difference: Listen to others. Snyder's conclusion for Batman was that listening to the people of Gotham – especially people who looked different than him – was more valuable than imposing his economic will on others without dialogue or fighting people without attempting to empathize with them.

Blooming

The trade paperback collection of *Superheavy* ends with Gordon-Batman continuing to combat Bloom's super-soldiers with increased realization that collaboration with the people of Gotham is more important than lording over them with anonymity and force. Partnership is the key theme that has bloomed from the gutters between Snyder and team's storied panels. At the end of the storyline – completed in *Bloom* (2016) – the protagonists ultimately

find that collaboration is the only sustainable way to equitably affect quality of life and feelings of safety in Gotham. In order for Batman to be an effective hero for contemporary readers, Snyder argued that his tactics for protecting the city had to change.

In regard to *Batman* #44, Snyder commented that the story was “meant to be a thesis about what our [Snyder, Capullo, and Team's] Batman is” (Ackerman, 2015). Snyder continued:

“We've tried to be pretty relentlessly on-point about him [Batman] being a symbol of inspiration in the face of tremendous fear, as opposed to a symbol of punishment, or a symbol of revenge, taking the city away from criminals. Here is where he begins to learn [the limits of] the methods that he thought would work: Finding a criminal, making an example of the criminal, throwing the criminal in jail ... Instead, what he has to learn is that the problems that he's facing in today's city are much more humbling, are much more complicated.” (Ackerman, 2015)

The value of *Superheavy* is in this reconceptualization of Batman as a partner with the community of Gotham City rather than avenger of ambiguous evils. This renewed Batman is the clear culmination of the story seeds that had been planted all throughout Snyder's work, making *Superheavy* (and its continuation in *Bloom*)

a fitting capstone for Snyder and Capullo's tenure on the *Batman* main line.

Superheavy's packaging is perhaps one of its biggest drawbacks. The authors' story very obviously ran from *Batman* #41 through #52 (as opposed to issue the issue #45 endpoint in the book version). In other words, the editing of the trade paperback reflects narrative splintering for marketing purposes more than in service to the audience and their understanding of the story. The *Superheavy* collection leaves readers to seek future volumes in order to discover how Snyder's Mr. Bloom fits with his overall social allegory, including commentary on the sources of evil. With this qualm aside, readers will almost certainly find that – regardless of their evaluation of Snyder's arguments – the *Superheavy* storyline represents an attempt to grapple with key questions about Batman's identity and presents a context in which to theorize responses to legitimate, longstanding criticisms of the character. *Superheavy* is a productive exercise in graphic storytelling, encouraging critical engagement from readers – readers who are sure to benefit from their exposure to the story content regardless of their familiarity with the Caped Crusader.

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