

## Watchmen

Moore A. *Watchmen*. New York, NY: DC Comics; 1987

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Quis custodiet ipsos custodes?<sup>1</sup>

(Who watches the watchmen?)

It is our distinct pleasure to write this review of what is arguably the greatest graphic novel of all time. If you have the slightest reservation about reading a graphic novel, please do not be deterred. In many respects, the graphic novel has become a respected art form since the term was coined in 1964. In the United States, the graphic novel is distinguished from the term “comic book,” though most fans joke about the distinction and care more about the quality of the genre. The well written graphic novel is a confluence of quality narrative and movie storyboard. The genre now has many works considered classics, such as: Will Eisner’s *A Contract with God* (1978),<sup>2</sup> Art Spiegelman’s Pulitzer Prize-winning *Maus* (1986),<sup>3</sup> Frank Miller’s *The Dark Knight Returns* (1986),<sup>4</sup> and Alan Moore’s *Watchmen* (1987).<sup>5</sup>

As it turns out, *Watchmen* is considered the gold standard for graphic novels and continues to exert major influence over the genre. It has won numerous accolades and was listed in *Time* magazine’s list of All-Time 100 Greatest Novels, the only graphic novel to be included in this list.<sup>6</sup> It was also the winner of the Hugo Award<sup>7</sup> and is one of the best-selling graphic novels ever published.<sup>8</sup> It is largely responsible for popularizing the graphic novel medium,<sup>9</sup> the setting of a precedent referred to as “the moment comic books grew up.”<sup>10</sup> Both stylistically and within its own narrative, *Watchmen* set a new benchmark in the graphic novel genre.

It seemed an opportune time to revisit Alan Moore’s masterpiece, considering both the current political climate and Damon Lindelof’s 2019 HBO *Watchmen* series.<sup>11</sup> The series is an ambitious

modern-day sequel to the graphic novel that garnered significant praise upon its release. The show delves into the racist violence that occurred in the 1921 Tulsa race massacre, and also focuses on familiar themes, reminding readers that Moore’s story was prescient.<sup>12</sup> Today, we face the same social dilemmas: social upheaval, the inactivation of supposed “heroes,” and the threat of mass murder. In other words, it has always been “ten minutes to midnight,” and Moore’s *Watchmen* continues to raise the same questions throughout generations about our leaders’ motivations and whether their ends justify their means.

*Watchmen* is an epic saga, satire, and a multi-layered exploration of human nature. It manages to be lofty, overarching, yet layered in psychological depth, character studies, and “stories within stories” in a way that can only be done in the graphic novel format. For those who appreciate graphic novel art, Dave Gibbons’ panels are genius and full of subtle details and messages, both clever and foreboding. In the *Watchmen* universe, the emergence of real-life superheroes in the United States occurred in the 1940s and 1960s (The Minutemen). Set in 1985, *Watchmen* shows the United States preparing for World War III with the Soviet Union. We join the story as a second wave of superheroes have been outlawed in a dystopian reality in which Richard Nixon remained president, the United States won the Vietnam war, and Watergate was never exposed.

*Watchmen* is worthy of discussion because of its exploration of human nature, crime, and existentialism. The novel takes an unflinching look at characters who believe themselves to be above the law with compelling justifications for their actions. Moore undertakes a skillful exploration of identity, human nature, and the social and moral concerns of society. He does this by using individual chapters to focus on each major character’s origin story. A central theme of *Watchmen* is whether the ends truly justify the means, at both the individual and societal level. On the societal level, we find widespread moral panic; we seem imminently headed for WWII, social “unrest” is rampant, and the country’s superhuman protector (Doctor Manhattan) is tricked into leaving the planet, which in turn leaves the country and the world dangerously unprotected. When humans are unable to stop terrorizing each other and may imminently destroy the world, the task of saving humanity seems nearly impossible.

It is difficult to read *Watchmen* without finding oneself vacillating between favorite characters. There is The Comedian, a brutal mercenary soldier with suspicious ties to Nixon and the Government. There is the aptly named Doctor Manhattan, a physicist whose ill-fated work accident transforms him into a God-like being who can transcend time and space yet senses his humanity slipping away. In the end, it is Ozymandias (the “world’s smartest man” who has built a business empire) who devises a scheme he hopes will unite humanity yet involves great sacrifice. Forensic and correctional psychiatrists may find the character Rorschach particularly compelling and oddly endearing. We see that his developmental years were replete with highly adverse childhood experiences. He is raised by an abusive, neglectful prostitute who openly conducts her business in front of him. He witnesses domestic and sexual violence. He is bullied by other children and over time learns to defend himself with animalistic fury.

Whereas Rorschach had every reason to succumb to a life of crime, his psychology takes an interesting turn. He proceeds in the opposite direction, becoming a vicious punisher of criminals who fear the level of his retributive aggression. From a psychological standpoint, it is understandable that Rorschach would become calloused, aggressive, and paranoid. What makes him more fascinating is his obsessional, rigid view of morality. We see the reaction formation and displacement at work in his compulsive, counterphobic drive to relentlessly seek out confrontation with the criminal element. He has been so overexposed to trauma, so pushed beyond his defense of counterphobia, that he seems to have lost the capacity for anxiety or fear of adversaries. Rorschach is not one for small talk; he speaks in a clipped monotone that conveys only serious information and makes others uncomfortable. He is able to draw our sympathy because we understand what made him this way, and we know that it now seems impossible for him to change or adapt.

At one point during his psychological evolution, Rorschach fashions the mask that would give him his name out of a special women’s dress fabric. This fact, and that he does this after becoming upset over reading about the rape and murder of Kitty Genovese, gives further insight into the unconscious forces driving him. Rorschach’s mask is unique, being made of a futuristic fiber that constantly changes patterns over his face as he speaks. The net effect is that criminals will

“project” whatever fears they have onto Rorschach’s visage, but underneath is pure uncompromising retributive justice.

Another Rorschach scene of note comes when he discovers a group of sadistic criminals who fed a young girl’s body parts to wild dogs. Rorschach is sent into an existential tailspin upon gazing too deeply into the abyss. He comes face to face with utter nihilism and meaninglessness, and his hypertrophied defenses come to the rescue, causing him to become even more callous, uncompromising, and extreme in his views. Or as Rorschach himself says: “Once a man has seen [man’s capacity for horrors], he can never turn his back on it. Never pretend it doesn’t exist” (Ref. 5, Chap. VI, p 15).

Of interest to forensic psychiatrists and psychologists will be the captivating scenes in which Rorschach is eventually arrested and must undergo an evaluation by a forensic psychologist. We see from Rorschach’s perspective how easy and mundane it is for him to fake good. The psychologist makes a case study of Rorschach and spends sessions with him, something the psychologist later comes to regret. The psychologist finds that his exposure to Rorschach’s mind and worldview has forever changed him, albeit not in a positive way. Forensic psychiatrists who have experienced various forms of countertransference and secondary trauma to morally objectionable patients and evaluatees will find this interaction fascinating.<sup>13</sup>

A prominent theme in *Watchmen* is questioning the motives of those who claim to be our protectors, our “watchmen,” who are often in a position to abuse their power. Vigilantism is defined as “law enforcement undertaken without legal authority by a self-appointed group of people,” and the Latin root, *vigilantem*, can be translated as “watchful.”<sup>14</sup> Thus, vigilantes as “heroes” are already a suspect group as they take the law into their own hands, a behavior that automatically implies they do not see themselves as bound to the rule of law. Moore uses this premise of the deeply flawed hero to both capture our attention and turn the nostalgic superhero story on its head. *Watchmen* is also of interest in that it seems to parallel many of the societal struggles we are seeing in contemporary life, i.e., protests, riots, use of force, inescapable politics, threat of nuclear war, and an overall creeping sense of doom. During a public protest, the Comedian character runs out of patience and begins shooting rubber bullets and tear gas into the crowd while commenting that his job is to

protect society. His colleague, the more levelheaded Nite Owl, replies, “Protection? Who are we protecting them from?” (Ref. 5, Chap. II, p 17). Dave Gibbons’ art comes in to compliment this scene as we see a woman spray painting the phrase: “Who watches the Watchmen?” on a brick wall before The Comedian shoots her. *Watchmen* contains themes that are unnervingly present today, distrust of the government, social unrest, and deep ethics concerns about injustice. With the *Watchmen*, Moore has transcended the genre.

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## Neurodiversity: From Phenomenology to Neurobiology and Enhancing Technologies

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Diversity, equity, and inclusion is a familiar mantra for liberal-minded Americans, disability attorneys, and AAPL members. Laws must be administered fairly to insure life, liberty, and property. We in forensic psychiatry may be asked to identify individuals with behavioral differences in situations ranging from entitlement programs (educational or financial) to sentencing in criminal proceedings (reduced culpability due to a mental condition). In those settings there is usually no problem with using diagnostic labels as leverage, a threshold to obtain benefits. Where it gets harder is with a range of conditions whose constituents reject pathologization and disability stigma. The differences, gross or subtle, represent underlying diversity in brain structure and function. Affected individuals increasingly seek parity while eschewing diagnostic labels. These are persons self-identified with neurodiversity, known to us as learning disabilities, attention deficit disorder, autism spectrum disorder, and others. In a fascinating exploration of the subject, Dr. Lawrence Fung and colleagues offer *Neurodiversity: From Phenomenology to Neurobiology and Enhancing Technologies*.

The book’s foreword, by the always inspiring Dr. Temple Grandin, sets the tone for a theme of positivity, rather than disability. Dr. Grandin explains how she navigated her own path to success by building on her strengths in an era before autism spectrum was recognized. She cites her work in explaining differential thinking in autism and Gardner’s “multiple intelligences” to set up fascinating chapters that form the basis of the strengths-based model of neurodiversity (SBMN). The SBMN contains well-known components such as