

High Marks for *Watchmen*

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Upon discovering that his estranged girlfriend's existence resulted from an unseemly affair between two former enemies, the unfathomably powerful nuclear superhero Dr. Manhattan reflects, "To distill so specific a form from the chaos of improbability, like turning air to gold. That is the crowning unlikelihood. The thermodynamic miracle."



The above statement does more than express Dr. Manhattan's restored faith in humanity. It also describes Zach Snyder's uber-faithful attempt to make a film of *Watchmen*. Translating Alan Moore's brilliant writing and Dave Gibbons' luminous illustrations into a new medium represents a tall task indeed. Conventional wisdom decreed for years that this complex and unwieldy graphic novel was "un-filmable."¹ While Snyder's ambitious effort does not quite turn air into gold, it comes mighty close.

First, a disclaimer: I loved comic books as a kid. Late in elementary school, I stumbled onto a second-tier Marvel strip called *Daredevil* shortly after it was assigned to a young genius named Frank Miller. (Miller later graduated to *The Dark Knight* and *Sin City*.) Price increases combined with the dawn of adolescence weaned me off comics by the mid 1980s. But I still credit Miller's brilliant storytelling with spawning a life-long appreciation for reading and with providing a needed refuge from my awkward pre-teen self during my parents' divorce. In short, comics saved me. Yes, the Lord works in mysterious ways.

Part of my disclaimer, then, is that I am not sure how Snyder's film plays to those unfamiliar with the graphic novel. The film so faithfully mirrors the book (it's practically a storyboard for it) that the two fuse together in my mind. Extensive back-stories for each of the masked heroes are mercifully cut from the film, but knowledge of the original undoubtedly informs my appreciation of the latter. If you experience trouble following the film, I recommend reading the comic, a work of art cited by *Time Magazine* as one of the 100 best *novels* ever. Reports suggest that Snyder will also include much of the original material omitted from the film in the special features menu of the upcoming DVD.

Inviting a Christian audience to consume either version of *Watchmen* may seem irresponsible, especially to pop culture-weary brothers and sisters in Christ. While the story does contain more than its share of sexuality and violence, it simultaneously wrestles with important and weighty theological and philosophical issues. Countless sermons could and should be preached on *Watchmen's* nuanced and allegorical treatment of predestination, miracles, the existence of God, human depravity, justice, and salvation. Few mainstream artistic texts so inventively grapple with these many important questions.

And how exactly did the depiction of sex and violence become the third rail of Christian criticism? While not for everyone, certainly not for children, *Watchmen* goes places familiar to the grittier passages of scripture. Nothing in Snyder's film, for example, equals the bleak