
Subject: Dave's Comicbook Capsules for December 2020

Posted by [dvandom](#) on Thu, 31 Dec 2020 05:32:48 GMT

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Dave's Comicbook Capsules Et Cetera

Intermittent Picks and Pans of Comics and Related Media

Standard Disclaimers: Please set appropriate followups. Recommendation does not factor in price. Not all books will have arrived in your area this month.

An archive can be found on my homepage, <http://www.eyrie.org/~dvandom/Rants>

Diagnosed a little over a year ago, cancer-free for a little less.

Items of Note (strongly recommended or otherwise worthy): nothing this week.

In this installment: Mercury Man, Overwatch Tracer - London Calling #3 (of 5), Adventure Finders Book 2 vol 1 Chapter 13, Astronauts: Women on the Final Frontier, Avatar the Last Airbender: the Promise TPB, The Other History of the DC Universe #1, Maestro #5 (of 5), The Rise of Ultraman #4 (of 5), U.S.Agent #2 (of 5), Shang-Chi #4 (of 5), Bill and Ted are Doomed #4 (of 4), The Orville #4, Norse Mythology #3-4, Sacred Six #5, Vampirella #16, Big Girls #5 (of 6), Giga #2, My Little Pony Friendship is Magic #92, Transformers #25, Transformers Galaxies #12, Transformers Escape #1 (of 5).

Current Wait List (books either Diamond didn't ship or my store failed to order): Nothing. I'll review WW84 once it's out on disc.

"Other Media" Capsules:

Things that are comics-related but not necessarily comics (i.e. comics-based movies like Iron Man or Hulk), or that aren't going to be available via comic shops (like comic pack-ins with DVDs) will go in this section when I have any to mention. They may not be as timely as comic reviews, especially if I decide to review novels that take me a week or two (or ten) to get around to.

Mercury Man: Magnolia Home Entertainment (U.S. distributor) - A 2006 Thai superhero film that I stumbled across for cheap at Big Lots. (There's another contemporary cheap superhero movie called Mirage Man out of Chile that I decided to pass on at Dollar Tree this month.) It had a few too many threads for a single movie and the protagonist actually wasn't the one who saved the day (a random soldier manning an AA gun for a "show off for the kids" event did that), he just cleaned up afterwards. Y'know how the Transformers movies feel like extended army recruitment ads? That sort of thing, but just cropping up for one scene. Still, a more satisfying climax than Gundala had. Worth the time, it cost me \$3.

Digital Content:

Unless I find a really compelling reason to do so (such as a lack of regular comics), I won't be turning this into a webcomic review column. Rather, stuff in this section will generally be full books available for reading online or for download, usually for pay.

Overwatch Tracer - London Calling #3 (of 5): Dark Horse - Note, #1 and #2 came out this month in paper form. This is the dramatic low point, with Tracer full of self-doubt and recriminations, her Omnic friends suffering physically and emotionally, and things looking like they're only going to get worse (given that there's two more issues and no guarantee that anyone's getting out of this who isn't in the game). Recommended. Free on ComiXology.

Adventure Finders Book 2 vol 1 Chapter 13: Patreon.com - Another downtime issue, but more explicitly a sort of Rivendell visit. Or a more explicit Rivendell visit, given the NSFW sequence near the end. :) I'll admit I kept waiting for the other shoe to drop and the monkey's paw to curl in a finger. Recommended. \$1/month on Patreon.

Trades:

Trade paperbacks, collections, graphic novels, pocket manga, whatever. If it's bigger than a "floppy" it goes here.

Astronauts: Women on the Final Frontier: :01 First Second - I kind of slipped out of the habit of keeping an eye out for Ottaviani's science comics a few years ago, but I spotted this on the shelf while browsing at B&N and grabbed it (I'll be catching up on the rest over the next few months). While written with astronaut Mary Cleave as the narrator of the whole thing, Ottaviani assembled it from several interviews and autobiographies (such as with Sally Ride, including the infamous "how many tampons would they need?" anecdote), but all people who Mary knew and could have heard the stories from directly. It'd be nice if this were purely an inspirational story, but the story of women in space involves a LOT of sexism and setbacks, even the first woman in space was chosen by the Soviet Union for sexist bourgeois reasons. But artist Maris Wicks helps sell the lighter parts, and while I sometimes had trouble figuring out who was on-screen at any given time (some caption boxes would've helped), Wicks kept everyone sufficiently on model I could figure it out with some searching about. Recommended. \$12.99/\$17.50Cn

Avatar the Last Airbender: The Promise TPB: Dark Horse - Okay, THIS is the first comic series set after the end of ATLA, the Search follows this. The main story involves a promise Aang makes to Zuko that he won't let the new Firelord turn into his own father...even if it means killing him. So...

plenty of angst for Aang when Zuko gets caught in a dilemma regarding removal of the Fire Nation Colonies (which does lead eventually to Republic City, but that's many volumes in the future). But this is only a facet of the main conflict, which is "How can Aang reconcile his roles as the Avatar and the last Airbender with each other, and with his obligations to his friends?" Meeting a few fan clubs only makes things worse, adding another conflict: is it better to protect his culture from imitators who see it as a fandom, at the risk of letting that culture die with him? To avoid drowning in Angst, though, there's a b-plot in which Toph gets her first metalbending students and discovers that there's more to teaching than yelling at people. Recommended. \$24.99/\$33.99Cn

The Other History of the DC Universe #1: DC Black Label - This is a square bound, magazine-sized book done as an illustrated novella...which is to say a lot of splash pages or pseudo-panel layouts with narration rather than dialogue. It's set up as an autobiography of Jefferson Pierce, focusing on 1972 through 1995. Yeah, it's outside any of the current DC continuities, and treats events as having happened during the years they were published. So Pierce isn't a nebulous Olympic athlete, he specifically competed in Munich. One exception to the "real time is publication time" is that the founding of the JLA happens in 1976, and the "current" age of superheroes started shortly before Black Lightning started his career. It's very Jeff-centric. It's also pretty bitter and the through-line is dominated by the idea that superheroes are damaged people who only do good in order to fight their own demons by proxy. A VERY Iron Age stance, so I guess it's appropriate to the chosen timeframe. While I get that a big part of the arc in this installment is Black Lightning learning to take a more positive view of heroism, the drumbeat of negativity did get on my nerves a bit. While a series that's about the side of the story from outside the White Male Hegemony certainly shouldn't be all smiles and light, I do hope that along with a diversity of viewpoints in this series, we get a diversity of attitudes. Next issue, John Ridley focuses on Bumblebee and Mal Duncan, though, so there may well still be some bitterness (especially if the fact BB has gotten lots of media time lately and Mal has not is leveraged in-story). Recommended. \$6.99

Floppies:

No, I don't have any particular disdain for the monthlies, but they *are* floppy, yes? (And not all of them come out monthly, or on a regular schedule in general, so I can't just call this section "Monthlies" or even "Periodicals" as that implies a regular period.)

Maestro #5 (of 5): Marvel - Well, one last big fight before Banner takes on the mantle of Maestro and assumes control of Dystopia. Fairly clever setup for it, and in keeping with the characters involved (nice Classical touch having Herc get a pyre). The intermittent backup feature with Rick

Jones gets its third part, as he deals with the ghosts of his past...one of whom isn't dead, but might as well be. Of course, in an IDW-ish move, #6 will be called #1 of a second 5 issue miniseries. Mildly recommended. \$3.99

The Rise of Ultraman #4 (of 5): Marvel - While there's some fighting, this is the "Secret Behind The World" issue, explaining why everyone's been so cagey about the K-rays, and also setting up the transition from kaiju to daikaiju. The Ultra alien continues to be a real ray of sunshine, but really anyone in this book who actually knows what's going on thinks the world is doomed. Recommended. \$3.99

U.S.Agent #2 (of 5): Marvel - Stepping back to establish a bit more about how Walker is acting in good faith but he might be the only person involved in this whole mess doing so. A lot of flashbacks about his childhood trauma and a touch of "You're remembering it wrong, because that's what trauma does to kids" rewriting (dunno how much of the rewritten background appeared elsewhere as opposed to being set up and knocked down in this story, though). USAjerk does continue to live up to that nickname, but he's also true to his usual portrayal as trying to do the right thing but with a dodgy moral compass and a lot of gaps in his intellectual/emotional toolbox. (He really only came across as a shallow self-serving garbage person when he was Super-Patriot, and he was fully in the kayfabe at that time.) Recommended. \$3.99

Shang-Chi #4 (of 5): Marvel - So, I typed up the reviews for all the other stuff prior to the last week's comics coming out (this comic being one of the December 30 releases), and in reviewing Giga #2 below, I really got on a bit of a roll complaining about a lack of structural storytelling. I also got a bit miffed by the "You won't remember this, but..." trope used in Transformers #25, because Ruckley wouldn't use narration to get across things he wanted the reader to know but the characters to not know. Mulling it over after writing the review, I thought back to the transition about 20 years ago, where it became the standard to ditch the existing structural language (omniscient narrators, captions, thought bubbles, footnotes, use of all upper case as the standard with lower case used for special purposes like whispering, rounded panels for flashbacks, etc) in favor of treating comics like movies that didn't move. Just images and spoken dialogue. What does all this have to do with Shang-Chi? Well, Shang-Chi has captions. It has time-and-place captions to make it clear when a flashback is happening or the action has moved elsewhere. No thought bubbles, but Shang-Chi gets captions that do the same thing. Normal dialogue is in upper case, with lower-case used for translated speech...and footnotes indicating what it's translated from. More than anything else in the actual story, the creative team has created a strong sense of nostalgia through purely structural means...quite appropriate for a story about delving into one's own past and that of their family. And delve he does, finding a truth behind the lies, a truth that may be as relevant today as it was centuries ago. And perhaps he will bring balance to the four eleme...er, to the five houses. Recommended. \$3.99

Bill & Ted Are Doomed #4 (of 4): Dark Horse Comics - I watched the new movie in between reading #3 and #4, so it was pretty clear how much this interquel could and couldn't do. Ultimately, as I expected last month, there's not a lot of growth or fundamental change for the characters who stick around for the third movie, but Station and the Robot Bill & Ted get significant (if often relegated to the background and b-plot) development and head off onto their own thing. About the only thing we know about the robots following this is that they're probably still "alive" by the time of Face the Music. And that's more a guess on my part. Oh, and Rufus does get a nice farewell, something they couldn't really do in the movie without Deepfake (and I'm kinda glad they didn't go beyond the holographic recording bit in the movie). All in all, though, it feels more like it was marking time, it didn't even resolve the immediate plot complication set up in the first part. Ah well. Mildly recommended. \$3.99

The Orville #4: Dark Horse Comics - Almost didn't get this one, due to the screwed up numbering system they've adopted for solicitations, my store didn't realize it was the same series as I'd added to my pull two months earlier. Anyway, this wraps up the two part "Heroes" story, in which the crew's clever and very against Union orders plan accomplishes its goals, but not in a way they would have wanted. As with the first arc, there's a strong theme of "Be careful what you wish for, you might get it" monkey paw running through this one. Goodman continues to bring the character voices as well to the printed page as to the script, and Cabeza's likenesses are spot-on without the results being wooden. Recommended. \$3.99

Norse Mythology #3: Dark Horse - Ah, another of the stories that made an impression on me from D'Aulaire's Norse Mythology...Sleipnir's origin story starts in this issue. I do kinda wonder if there's anyone reading this series who isn't familiar with the myth already, but if there are, they're in for a bit of a shock. Piotr Kowalski does the art this issue, and his Loki is a little more rugged than Ordway's, but still recognizable as the same model. In fact, everyone's kinda rugged, including Freya, which I guess would explain how Thor can impersonate her in another story I expect will be adapted in a future issue. Recommended. \$3.99

Norse Mythology #4: Dark Horse - Whoops, missed this on the Previews list, the title's doubling up this month. I'll leave the review I wrote above alone and go forwards. Anyway, it takes only about half the issue to wrap up the Master Builder myth, and the remainder starts the story of Loki's children. Well, his other children. The ones he sired. Mostly the famous three he had with Angrboda, although his sons by Sigyn get a few panels. While the last two stories were "Loki screws up and needs to squirm out of it" myths, this one is solidly Odin's fault. Sure, Loki literally screwing around was a problem, but the Aesir's high-handed way of dealing with the resulting children sowed the seeds of Ragnarok. Recommended. \$3.99

Sacred Six #5: Dynamite - One of the big problems this book has had (and it has had several) is that the changing art teams and generally murky aesthetic means that a lot of "surprise reveals" are just, "Um, who's that person? Are we supposed to know them?" situations. And so it is on the last page of this issue, where a surprise reveal might be a new character, might be one of several characters already seen, I really don't know. At least the no-longer-drawn-by-Jae-Lee Samira origin story ends and the characters get folded into the main narrative. Mildly recommended, but I'm beginning to lose hope that this is going to come together coherently. \$3.99

Vampirella #16: Dynamite - Well. This appears to take place after Sacred Six wraps up its first arc, #6 at the earliest. On the plus side, it's got plenty of footnotes to clarify how badly the publishing schedule got screwed up and guide later reading. (And captions, and narration, and rounded panels to indicate flashbacks.) And since the "telling Doc Chary about it" device is still in full force (and Priest might have been suspecting production schedules would be slipping badly by this point), there's plenty of explanation. That's a bit of a downside, to be honest... the story has to spend so much time explaining itself that not a lot actually happens. It's a summary of another two to three issues of a comic we'll never get to see. It's an interesting story, I just wish it could have unfolded a little more naturally. Oh, and possibly unintended Underworld Unleashed reference in the middle of it. Mildly recommended. \$3.99

Big Girls #5: Image - In some ways, this is a major turning point, a big victory for a better way of doing things. A major antagonist is (probably) dead, the "good guy" leader who is very definitely part of the problem is at least having a very bad day, and the rampaging monsters are dealt with in a constructive fashion. But then there's a big explosion and next issue will be a huge fight scene anyway, which really felt like an unnecessary "what a tweeest!" bit of writing. Mildly recommended. \$3.99

Giga #2: Vault - This one took a re-read to figure out, in part because I was thrown by the flashback sequence that didn't look like one. When you're going to tell a story out of order, you need to establish a clear visual language about where scenes fall in the timeline. There's no structural cues, you just have to know the hairstyles and scars or lack thereof for the characters. It's a pity, because the artist does use the gutters for aesthetic purposes, sometimes having them white, sometimes black, sometimes rusted. He was clearly willing to use the gutters, just not for signalling anything consistent. It just seemed to be "this would look cool," which is okay, but a book that bounces around viewpoints and timelines really needs to use the visuals to tell that part of the story. Failing that, put datestamp captions at the starts of scenes. It's a good story, but harder to follow than it needs to be, and the obscurity does not seem to be intentional...just an artist reinventing the wheel and getting it a little wobbly. Mildly recommended. \$3.99

My Little Pony Friendship is Magic #92: IDW - This arc has been about expanding the world, further demonstrating that while Equestria may be super important due to the whole "control the Sun and the Moon" thing, other lands have their own magics and in this case their own Elements of Harmony (the Tree for which appeared at the end of #91). But where Equestria's holders of the Elements of Harmony were literally thrown together on the road to finding them, now we get a group that was once together and then separated, but now healing their rifts...on the road to finding the Elements. So, finding the Elements of Harmony is kinda like going on a life-changing adventure with Zuko. And yes, I've complained recently about going to the well of the Elements of Harmony too often to wrap up a story, but Whitley and Price do it very well here. Recommended. \$3.99

Transformers #25: IDW - "War World" arc trade dress. Okay, Ruckley skipped over the resolution of #24 for the most part and jumped to the expected Big Climactic Issue anyway. The first two thirds focus on an attempt by the Senate Guard to rescue the Senate and Sentinel Prime in particular, but because he's basically a Donald Trump pastiche in this series he screws up his own rescue. Seriously, his portrayal as such in Alan Young's <http://www.toyboxcomics.com> is meant to be over the top satire, and Ruckley's Sentinel Prime is almost indistinguishable from Young's. Mind you, the orange Sentinel Prime was outright evil in IDW1, and the only significant use of the name before that (TF:Animated) had him as a pompous boor, so I guess at this point he's never going to have two brain cells to rub together. A bunch of toy characters show up, some die horribly, and then Orion Pax accidentally gets the Matrix, gets told a lot of truths that he is told he will forget once he wakes up (aka blatant exposition to the reader), and then wakes up to declare himself Optimus Prime. Man, this may have had some good character bits, but it was otherwise a steaming pile of idiot plot. All that buildup, and Ruckley not only fails to stick the landing, he faceplants. Meh. \$7.99.

Transformers Galaxies #12: IDW - So, it's Gunbuster time for Ultra Magnus and his crew, in a desperate fight dangerously close to the event horizon of a black hole, with all the fun time dilation effects that entails (no one gets spaghettified, though). The establishment of the new continuity Magnus's personality is reasonably complete, along with a nigh-Arthurian mission and an outside view on Megatron's takeover (which, frankly, works better than in the main title). And part of that mission appears to lead directly into Escape, so I'm glad I read this one first. Recommended. \$3.99

Transformers Escape #1 (of 5): IDW - Ruckley's back to writing two books a month as he pens this miniseries about getting the Ark outtahere. Specifically, there's four Arks, but also more evacuees than just Autobots... there's all those organic races that established presences on Cybertron and are not going to fare well under the Decepticon rule (or in Insecticon bellies). Looks like Wheeljack, Hoist, Nautica, Road Rage, and Hound will be the core protagonists here, trying to save refugees from the chaos of War

World. Artist Beth McGuire-Smith manages to do both good Cybertronians and good organics, a necessity for a story like this. Maybe with a more focused remit, Ruckley will do a better job of moving the story forwards and giving it a satisfying conclusion. Provisionally recommended. \$3.99

Bonus content! I decided after all that nattering about structural elements in some of the reviews to go over the books in this review and see how many times they use various pieces of traditional comics structural language (multiple issues of a single title, like Overwatch or Norse Mythology, will be counted as a single instance. Sixteen total books involved. I was counting lettering, but it looks like that fad has largely faded, at least in the books I get...only the Other History of the DC Universe used primarily mixed-case, although Shang-Chi used it to indicate when someone was speaking in Mandarin. One thing I didn't track is the use of narration-style boxes to indicate someone speaking off-panel or bridging to/from another scene, which is AFIAK a more recent thing.

Thought Bubbles: 2, plus one "sleeping" bubble.

Narration: 8, mostly from a character in the story

Narration in place of Thought Bubbles: 2

Footnotes: 3

Time/Location Captions: 10, but only used consistently on scene-change in some of them. Most would use them once or twice, but not every time the scene shifted, nor did they always identify what some scenes were at all.

Altered panels or coloring to indicate flashback: 4 consistently, one inconsistently, one not at all. The other 10 books had no flashbacks.

To be fair, there's three Priest books in that lot, and he's pretty consistent in the visual language he puts in the scripts, especially the time/location captions. Anyway, while some of the "Comics Are Serious Art" changes of 20 years ago have reverted, things like thought bubbles and footnotes have largely stayed gone. Even the two books with text in thought bubbles only had one or two bubbles all issue, characters aren't allowed to just think anymore, it has to be all out loud. And footnotes are too much work, I guess. (For reference, Shang-Chi just had the "translated from ancient Mandarin" footnote, USAgent had footnotes explaining various acronyms and jargon used in dialogue, and Vampirella had loads of cross-reference footnotes telling readers where to go to read more.) Anyway, I leave it to actual scholars of comics to answer the question of overall trends, my tastes are "fringe of the mainstream" and likely not representative. But I wanted to go on about this topic a bit, and didn't want to do it as a separate essay.

In short: comics spent 50-60 years building up a distinctive language combining words and art to tell stories, then 20 years ago threw it away in favor of being non-moving movies. Some of the old ways have returned, but some remain largely lost, with creators uncomfortable with the past of their own medium.

Dave Van Domelen, "NECRONOMICLOWN! Whose gimmick I admit I am not a huge fan of, but who are nonetheless EVIL METAL PERSONIFIED!" - frontman of Vile Empire, Bill & Ted Are Doomed #4 (of 4)
