

One of the many ways mainstream superhero comics frequently disappoint me is their lack of worldbuilding. Most superheroes live in some generic, idealized city where they halfassedly work at some nondescript job and occasionally encounter some expendable/forgettable citizens. This doesn't make for a very immersive reading experience, nor a relatable one. It's hard to find a series with a setting you feel you can actually visit and with characters you can recognize. I have a good feeling that Batgirl will be one of those rare gems, as Stewart-Fletcher put in just as much time developing Babs' civilian life as her costumed adventures. True, they have the assistance of Tarr, who can fit massive amounts of information on a single page and make it look expressive and striking. Not every writer's so artistically lucky. But it's also Stewart-Fletcher's unwillingness to let the page limit compromise how much story they want to tell that makes each issue of Batgirl so wonderfully dense. All that effort encourages you to be as invested in the fate of Babs' thesis as her struggle against a virtual stalker. It helps that the people involved in her grad work are as fully-formed as any villain. In short order, you're introduced to Jeremy Degroot, a youngish professor in Babs' department; Nadimah, Babs' research assistant; and Qadir, Nadimah's brother in the robotics department who lends Babs a spare external drive.* Each comes with a clear, distinct voice, but with no outrageous tics or mannerisms, the weak writer's substitute for personality. By contrast, the issue's antagonists are weakly motivated and not terribly dimensional. They have no real reason to target Batgirl and enter a life of crime in the process; they're just told to do so and given a crapload of money as inducement. This character deficiency is almost compensated by the creativity of their design: twin otaku who take up the guise, weapons, and catchphrase ("Tomorrow cries danger!") of their favorite anime villains. It's just not clear how much recurring use is in them, though they definitely have reason to come back for vengeance since in their mind, Babs is the one who gave them the means and order to attack her. Whoever this person is that's harassing Babs, they've insinuated themselves fairly deeply in her life. It's disturbing enough they know her secret identity, and that they can render her trusty hack into the GCPD criminal database useless, but the invasiveness goes further. This person knew enough about Babs' history pick out an obscure anime she loved as a child and create two rip-off villains she admitted once freaked her out. That's an intimate level of knowledge that maybe should concern her (and Dinah) more than it does here. But you can hardly blame her for being more focused on her civilian affairs as Burnside and its denizens become increasingly colorful and interesting. Anime fans will immediately fall in love with the latest Burnside establishment, "robot pony," a Japanese pop culture shop whose shelves are stocked with oddly cute collectibles and whose proprietor is a snooty hipster in a bunny mask and host outfit. The level of detail Stewart-Fletcher commit to his knowledge of fictional anime is delightful ("I can tell you about Science Battle Hero Nuclea, the original Japanese title before it was butchered for American TV."). Weird as it is to say, it's this kind of stuff that brings this world even closer to our own. As previously mentioned, Tarr's insane level of detail is crucial for Batgirl's success. But it's not just about filling the panels with props (although you can enjoy looking at the interior of "robot pony" for a good, long time). With so many talking heads, Tarr keeps the energy levels from stagnating by keeping the characters moving about, fiddling with their surroundings, and changing their expression, all while keeping it appropriate to the context of the scene. Perhaps most importantly, Tarr brings the increasingly larger cast of Batgirl to life by putting an intense amount of thought into their design. Jeremy doesn't have the chiseled features of most male romantic interests in comics, but with his tousled hair, faint scruff, strong nose, and friendly eyes, you can see why Babs would (secretly) consider him cute. On a similar note, Qadir isn't

your conventional nerd; he's got the big glasses, but his preppy clothes are casually worn and perfectly coordinated (thanks, Wicks!), showing how a confident nerd is also an attractive nerd. The same applies to the female characters; Frankie doesn't have your conventional hairdo or fashion sense, nor does she have a supermodel's body, but she's plainly attractive. Same with Nadimah, who doesn't let her Muslim upbringing stop her from being the most stylishly dressed gal in the issue. Looks aren't everything, but appearance reveals a great deal in Batgirl.

-Minhquan Nguyen The post Batgirl #36 – Review appeared first on Weekly Comic Book Review.

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