

Gotham by Midnight may be a new story, but it lives in a vision dreamed long ago. The world of this series was seen by arthritic, near-sighted men bent over wooden tables in echoing stone galleries while outside their walled cloisters armored knights fought and died in bloody mud, robed scholars vehemently debated metaphysical puzzles couched in logical formulations of migraine-inducing complexity, mystics and alchemists sought the keys of creation in ragged manuscripts scribed in ancient tongues, and all that was or had been or could ever be resonated with the voice of a crucified god. Ben Templesmith's images do not come from the practices of comics as much as from the traditions of manuscript illumination. His rich browns suggest faded parchment, his dark shadows smudged inks. His thin figures with their lined faces and angular limbs speak of suffering ascetics, his long-eared Batman is a horned demon who reminds us that even the Fallen still partake of the Angelic substance. This is the Gotham of medieval prophecy, the Kingdom of the Bat revealed in A.D. 1239 rather than A.D. 1939. Ray Fawkes' story spools out in simple page layouts mostly utilizing five rectangular panels in strong vertical sequence, a design that enhances the illusion of a great, enfolding manuscript that encompasses our perception, its illuminated message relentlessly sweeping us into medieval Gotham in its totality. The tale itself, as befits both a first issue and a moral epic, begins with a simple premise. Sergeant Rook, an emissary of Gotham City Police Department's internal affairs division, arrives at Precinct 13 to investigate the mysterious goings on in that poorly documented backwater. Precinct 13 is more formally known as the Detailed Case Task Force, but its members call it the Midnight Shift. Commissioner Gordon assembled the task force as a special project under his direct supervision, and as the commissioner's tenure has apparently not survived the events of Batman Eternal, the authorities at Gotham Central now want to know the justification for the expenditure. Rook rapidly meets Lieutenant Weaver, the amiable commander of the precinct, and Detective Jim Corrigan, heart of the project and, known to readers but not to Rook, host of the Spectre, the embodiment of God's vengeance. Rook also makes the acquaintance of two mysterious consultants, Dr. Tarr, a forensic examiner with unusual interests, and Sister Justine, who appears to be an expert in dead languages among other things. The visitor from internal affairs quickly gets caught up in an investigation involving children who are being kidnapped and replaced, or at least returned very changed. Gotham by Midnight at last allows Ray Fawkes' talent to sink roots in friendly soil and blossom. The story proceeds from Fawkes' portion of Batman Eternal, undoubtedly the weakest of that book's multiple storylines, seemingly present largely to nail down the supernatural corner of Gotham in service to Eternal's global survey of the city. But freed from the strictures of Batman Eternal's carefully structured plot progression and wedded to Templesmith's completely different visual approach, Fawkes is able to launch a true exploration of the weird corners secreted around Batman's city. Fawkes' new story builds on the moral framework inherent in Gotham, a framework that, when infused with a heavy dose of dark pseudo-Catholicism, deepens and strengthens the metaphysical world with which he works. Fawkes at last moves beyond the brittle harshness of Constantine, the existential psychodrama of Trinity of Sin: Pandora, and the supernatural soap opera of Justice League Dark. This strange triumph belongs not only to Templesmith and Fawkes, but also to Batman group editor Mark Doyle. Gotham by Midnight stands as the latest victory in the new campaign of the Batman Office to move beyond an editorially managed house style and toward a system of diverse, creator-driven titles. This effort has included some misfires, such as the conceptually limited Arkham Manor and the odd thematic cast-off Klarion. But the morality mysteries of Gotham by Midnight rest squarely among the successes, joining such surprising companions as the coming-of-age adventures of

Gotham Academy, the multi-leveled crime drama of Catwoman, and the joyous spy shenanigans of Grayson. The post Gotham by Midnight #1 appeared first on Weekly Comic Book Review.

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