

With so many experimental takes for comicbook series these days, like Superior Foes of Spider-Man, The Unbeatable Squirrel Girl and Ant Man, it seems fitting that Marvel would return to one of its original experimental takes, Howard the Duck. I don't have many memories of the 70s' series, since I came into comics about a decade after it, but it seems it was a sweet spot--in-between the time fans would wax nostalgic for Steve Gerber's singular take and the time when fans would dismiss George Lucas' movie as a tired joke. What I do remember from a back issue here and there was that Howard's series was equal parts a Marvel Icon book, a Vertigo book, a MAX book, before there were ever such a things as Marvel Icon, Vertigo, MAX, and so on. Howard the Duck, much in the same way of Eastman and Laird's Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles, presented a satirical take on comicbook tropes while at the same time using them, and like E&L's TMNT, the irreverent tone of H the D was then subsumed by larger interests (the Marvel universe or children's television) and watered down until little remained of the edge that existed to make them popular in the first place. Instead of returning to the satirical roots of the original Howard, this new series presents a fairly straight-forward just-another-Tuesday-in-Marvel-Manhattan setting but through the eyes of a sassy and sardonic main character. (You know, 'cause he's a DUCK. As many of the jokes try to take pains to point out.) There's no attempt to satirize this world, nor any inversion of tropes or familiar plot points. So it would be unfair to judge this series against the aims of its predecessors. It's just yet another "shlubber-hero" book a la Superior Foes, Hawkeye, Ant-Man. But even judged on it's own merits, this book falls way short of what it needs to be. First of all, sarcastic main characters are really difficult to care for. You see, sarcasm works with your friends because, well, you're *friends.* You know what they really mean when they're complaining, being snarky, or otherwise bantering about. When you see someone *else* trying to be sarcastic, you're just as likely to roll your eyes and think "wow, what a jerk." In other words, I'm not sure how we are meant to sympathize with Howard in this issue. He's a loud-mouth. We get it. So how does this loud mouth with a chip on his shoulder who always feels trapped and has little sympathy for humans become a private eye? Even the most jaded private investigators are motivated by some sliver of humanity, in the noir-ish tradition, but we don't get any of that here. And in fact, the whole investigation isn't even the point as Howard (and his story) is hijacked by the Collector, because, you know, the movies. If this book is supposed to establish a new status quo for Howard, we have no motivation given for it, and we are taken away immediately from it anyway. Another aim of this book is to be "funny." It's actually got some great visual and narrative gags along the way, but for every hit there are a few misses. I've already hinted at the overuse of the whole "I'm a DUCK" punchline/juxtaposition, but I genuinely liked the wit displayed by the new character Tara Tam. The near-perfect joke of the book, though, was the (literal) pile of trash that served as Howard's secretary. That was set up and delivered in a three-panel display that works so well in the comicbook medium. And yet, then there was the over-the-top Spider-Man moment as he called out to Uncle Ben. That was jarring and out of place, ruining an otherwise enjoyable appearance by the character. Much of the humor comes from the art, which in general is pretty amazing. The timing of panels and the visual gags are impressive. Howard is expressive and unique, and (perhaps unlike the premise of the narrative) fits extremely well in the setting around him. What's particularly tricky is when characters of different statures have to fill the same panel, but Quinones handles the challenge flawlessly, shifting perspectives and using foreground/background as needed without sacrificing the flow of story. The art, more so than the character himself, is a reason to follow the book. The post Howard the Duck #1 appeared first on Weekly Comic Book Review.

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