

When you think of Gail Simone, two titles immediately spring to mind. *Birds of Prey* was a feminist stronghold, proof that women could not only carry a series by themselves, but they could kick ass and win hearts doing it. But it's *Secret Six* that most embodies the Simonian voice and worldview. It wasn't just that villains were its protagonists; Task Force X, Suicide Squad, and Thunderbolts had already broken that ground by the time SS came to life. What made SS great was that as broken, disturbed, and vicious as its characters were, they also had depths of insight, compassion, wisdom, and principle that many, many heroes didn't. For obvious reasons, that's a difficult magic to recreate, so approaching this newest volume of SS requires as much caution as excitement. The big part of the secret (ba-bum-bum) of the earlier series was in its cast, a potent blend of big names (Bane), refurbished lower-tier villains (Catman, Cheshire, Deadshot), and characters of Simone's own creation (Scandal Savage, Jeanette, Ragdoll). The current series has a similar blend, but it will take time to see if the new guys will have the same compatibility. At least we still have Thomas Blake (Catman) as the center of the Six. Not that he was necessarily everyone's favorite character before—he didn't have the colorful personality of, say, Deadshot, Ragdoll, or Jeanette—but he was a necessary grounding force for a team whose extremes in behavior and morals could have easily gone out of control and been off-putting. Often portrayed as the only team member who could potentially become a fully-fledged hero, his calm, honorable temperament made the Six more palatable as a whole. It's possible Blake will resume that role here—his embarrassment at seeing Shauna Belzer's (the Ventriloquist) privates shows he has some conscience—but trapped in a twisted experiment, he seems as unhinged as his five companions, completely freaking out at his confinement: "Look. I can not be responsible. I have to get out of this damn box... Or people are going to get dead, do you get that?" And who are these five companions I just mentioned? This issue treats them with unusual brevity, not revealing much of the sparkling personality that Simone's known for. But then, they don't have the opportunity; they're too occupied dealing with the inexplicable horrors of their prison and its demand to figure out "What is the secret?" What they all have in common with Blake is the capacity to take on a different persona. Kani may seem like a boyish femme fatale, but as Porcelain, she's a bowler-wearing robber. Damon Wells (Bigshot) seems like your typical gruff, grounded P.I., but he can hulk out into a Hyde-like character who takes crap from no one, not even Blake. Black Alice's girlish vulnerability is tempered by her massive powers, which allow her to literally take on the guise of other people. Strix's duality as a master assassin with a child's mentality is well-known for anyone's encountered her in Simone's *Batgirl*, as is Belzer taking her crazy to a whole new level when puppet Ferdie comes out to play. These personality shifts may be the key to understanding the new Six's dynamic; it may very well be the secret their prison is asking for. Compared to the beautifully etched cover by Dale Eaglesham, Lashley's art is a more common, messier affair, which is not what a title like this needs. Part of the earlier SS's dichotomy was the contrast between Nicola Scott's lushly crafted art and the brutality it depicted. Lashley's lines are less defined, giving into the chaos of its characters, and is often at the mercy of the inker. At times—I suspect when Lashley's inking his own pencils—his art looks relatively sharp and detailed, but later in the issue, things get both simple and a little sloppy, with fine features disappearing altogether. Some Musings: - Blake has both a woman and a man fondling over him in the bar, and he seems to enjoy it just fine. A bisexual Catman? I'm interested. - "Are those stubby pencils in your pockets or are you just happy to see me?" Ouch. The post *Secret Six* #1 appeared first on *Weekly Comic Book Review*.

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