

I've been enjoying *The Transformers (Robots in Disguise)* since it began its second season and relocated to Earth, however I can't deny that whenever John Barber makes the jump back to Cybertron I'm reminded of how excellently suited he is to the setting. Rife with backstabbing and political unrest, Cybertron is one of the most fascinating elements of the current Transformers landscape and, in *Transformers: Punishment*, Barber takes the opportunity to explore the remnants of the old Decepticon movement. As Optimus Prime returns to Cybertron, he finds himself caught up in the hunt for a serial killer who's murdering Decepticon criminals. Barber's voice for Optimus Prime has perhaps never been stronger, capturing the supreme weights on his mind and the goodness and optimism that started him down this path in the first place. There's a dual weariness and good humor that really sells the ache in his spark and the heroism of his choices. It's also interesting how distinct Barber makes Prime's role as a law officer from his duties as a military leader. Barber's tenure on Transformers began with an admission from Optimus that he didn't belong in a post-war world, though he's put that behind him, it's clear why he had to wrestle with that thought reading this. Most of the other characters are fairly simple - Slug advocates against Decepticons at every turn, Windblade criticizes the war, etc. - but Barber plays them off of Prime so well that you stay engaged. Here and there you realize that the structure of this story that claims that Optimus Prime wandered into an unrelated event is entirely built around his presence, down to a near complete lack of initiative from the remainder of the cast, but the plot is clever and flows beautifully. While agency is a problem for most of the characters, the non-Autobots are written particularly well. Barber's Starscream, as ever, is super fun to have around. This book (miniseries?) is the first to really give us any lengthy interaction between Prime and Starscream and it quickly proves to be a fruitful pairing. Especially with the story's insistence that Prime never lies, the two are natural opposites. Nonetheless, that same truthfulness means that Prime can't deny that Starscream is always right and, thus, the Autobot leader can't get a leg up on him. One of my favorite examples of this dichotomy comes early in part one, where Starscream pretends to forget Earth's name. Optimus calls him out on his obvious affectation, but it's great to think that something so simple is a reason for head games for the former Decepticon. Likewise, Barber introduces two of his most interesting characters in the form of the disillusioned Sandstorm and the dutiful Barricade. Sandstorm's position as a disgusted former Autobot is an important contrast to the majority of the cast's hatred for the Decepticons. Sandstorm's moments of guilt and vulnerability are also some of the strongest character work in the book, managing to present him as sincerely damaged by his experiences, rather than just hot and cold. On the other side of things is Barricade, whose faith in the Decepticon ideology makes him one of the most quietly heroic characters in the story. He also functions as a fantastic way to make clear that Starscream was never on any side but his own, clarifying the position of the Decepticons greatly. Though he plays a small role here, I seriously hope that we see more of him. In terms of structure, the book has a rolling quality that reminds me a little of the ocean. Like any mystery, the plot is dedicated to individual leads that crescendo but turn up empty before leading into the next. Particularly as a result of the short nine-page installments that the series was released in, the pacing can vary, perhaps more than it should, but I, personally, found there to be an entrancing fluidity to the book helped keep me guessing rather than feeling technically uneven. Livio Ramondelli's work is always a thing of beauty and this is no exception. The atmosphere of Ramondelli's work is omnipresent and highly impressive. Upon his return, Optimus Prime describes Cybertron as "A chrome sphere[...] Tarnished by millions of years of war." Ramondelli is a perfect artist to depict such a planet. Covered in scratches and discolorations, Ramondelli's Transformers feel ancient and

battle-tested. The Mystery genre also suits Ramondelli. If there is a consistent problem with his work, it's that the monolithic quality he imbues his scenes with can feel a little inflexible and the addition of the Madefire animation may have exaggerated this in print. Fast paced scenes depict snapshot moments, the most important moments, but they rarely capture motion more than a few seconds in any direction and Ramondelli rarely attempts to stitch such moments together. Still, if you're looking for someone to deliver a noir atmosphere with giant robots, this is your guy. Ramondelli's moody lighting and haunting optics are a perfect fit for this story of blurred boundaries and post-war struggle. Chapter three particularly benefits, with scenes like the return to [ ]'s bar and a briefing lit by a hologram of Prime carrying an innate visual punch. There are occasional imperfections in the art. Sludge, for instance, looks undeniably dopey in his first few appearances, while even some great panels seem to be cheating perspective a little awkwardly. The flip side of that is that Ramondelli's Transformers have an awesome, dreamlike quality. Optimus and Starscream, especially, look great, embodying a sturdiness and sharp elegance, respectively. The other big winner is the obscure Flamefeather, who's owl-like aesthetic is equal parts beautiful and creepy under Ramondelli's pen. The post Transformers: Punishment appeared first on Weekly Comic Book Review.

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