

The Witching Hour

Skinwalker

ISBN: 1929998457

by Nunzio DeFillipis and Christina Weir

Art by Brian Hurtt and Arthur Dela Cruz

Oni Press 2003

Just to be clear from the start: this is not a comic version of a Tony Hillerman novel. **Skinwalker** does combine some of the same elements of those tales: grim Navajo legends apparently come to life, a reluctant partnership, this time between a member of the Navajo Tribal Police and a FBI hotshot profiler on the way to the top. Gregory Haworth just wants to get to the point where he can do his work **and** get the credit for it with his own team, but a mysterious plea from an old partner leads him, on his last few days of vacation, to Dinehotso within Navajo Country. Despite getting off on entirely the wrong foot with local officer Anne Adakai, Haworth insists on staying once his old partner is discovered hideously murdered -- skinned alive. Covering everything from myths to procedure and all the emotions that can get tangled up in intense investigations and opposing cultures, **Skinwalker** is a welcome addition to the piles of crime and horror comics out there. Hurtt's delicate penciling alongside Dela Cruz's rich graytones lend the whole visual a suitably oppressive air and make the horror all the more overwhelming. Echoing the **X-Files** and FBI profiler tales everywhere, **Skinwalker** nonetheless maintains a solid and engaging tale surrounding two very believably hard-assed and vulnerable characters fighting for the truth against more enemies than they bargained for. On top of all that, without any fanfare, **Skinwalker** finally allows for some diversity in our comics heroes, featuring a Navajo woman who is neither ridiculously mythical nor love-interest-only material. Her biting, conflicted, intelligent personality alone is worth the read. The horror is very true, here, as well -- rather than slasher antics, **Skinwalker** is filled with suspense and just enough gore to give you a glimpse of the horror without being prurient or stomach-turning.

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The Darkness: Coming of Age

ISBN: 1582400326

by Garth Ennis, writer; Marc Silvestri, pencils; Batt, ink

Top Cow Productions, 2003

Jen: **The Darkness: Coming of Age** was originally published in 1996 as a kind of prequel for the series **The Darkness** (which we haven't read, so we're not certain how representative this volume is). It seems to me that the intended audience for this book must be fans of **The Darkness**; the whole thing is very tongue-in-cheek.

Alison: See, immediately you've put your finger on the essence of my problem with **The Darkness**. Because rather than a "ho ho, how ironic" chuckle, what I really got from this was a half-hearted teenage boy's giggle over a story that takes itself way too seriously.

Jen: See, you think it takes itself seriously. I think Ennis is knowingly deploying bad comics clichés... at least, I hope that's what he's doing.

Alison: Well if so he's being pretty darn subtle... in fact, subtle enough to be completely invisible, if you

get my drift. I'm still mulling over the fact that the guy who wrote [Preacher](#) also had a hand in this. That's a story where the "average tough guy finds himself heir to awesome powers beyond our mortal ken" thing is working well. Here, Jackie can't stop thinking about sex long enough to produce a decent plot point.

Jen: And that's funny!

Alison: Yes, yes it is... except that I really think such conversational clunkers as "We have to stop him from having sex!" are meant just that literally. Which is scary, but not in a good way. I mean, here's a guy who's going to die if he impregnates a woman and thus passes on The Darkness, right? And what's the solution? Condoms? The silver ring thing? Explorations of gay relationships? Oh no: the answer, my friends, is to create some kind of sex-toy homunculus. Of course.

Jen: Of course. For the benefit of our readers, a little more plot summary: Jackie Estacado, our (anti)hero, learns that he has inherited a power called The Darkness that allows him to make demons and metal claw thingies and the like spring out of his flesh. Apparently he can also learn to create faux-women with whom he can have sex without risking conception (because if he conceives a child that child will receive The Darkness and Jackie will die, and Jackie is the last best hope of the Brotherhood of the Darkness, who want to create a paradise for themselves on earth... they fight the Angelus, a force of "tyrannical law and order", lead by a foxy lesbian with giant horns and a penchant for clothing that looks like it was painted on with chrome nail polish). Needless to say, the Angelus has a harem of anatomically unlikely demon babes following her around. This comic has everything a boy could want- gore, "lesbians", fantastically-proportioned women, men with no discernable necks...

Alison: Which is all fine as far as it goes, but come on -- can't we pander to our pubescent boy audience with a little more, how do you say, panache? Is it too much to ask that you pair the gratuitous skin shots and bad-boy beefcake with writing that doesn't make me wince at every other line? Ennis! Why?

Jen: It's true that, while you can see traces of the ideas behind Preacher here, they seem to have been lobotomized. I still contend that a lot of the writing is meant to be funny. I mean, come on! "The Darkness is like the Force on crack." Yet you do have a point. By the end, the writing is painfully bad. Whether intentional or not, it just gets to be too much.

Alison: And then at the end you're denied any sense of closure -- has Jackie grown or changed? Has his relationship with girl love interest Jenny matured? Do we understand better the nature of The Darkness and the forces that surround it? I would say: not so much. It may be that this wouldn't bother me if I knew more about the rest of the series (but perhaps ignorance is bliss!). I slogged through this collection of appalling outfits, awkward language, and excessive prurience and I'm not even going to be rewarded with an interesting story? The mostly-naked hotties I can find on the top shelf of a newsstand, and for the rest I'm sticking with [Preacher](#).

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Jack the Ripper
ISBN: 1561631248
by Rick Geary
NBM 1995

I will admit to a fascination with Jack the Ripper. Apparently like a good chunk of the American public, I am intrigued as to what causes such great evil to manifest in certain men and women, and all of the stories, from the suave Republican Ted Bundy to everyone's favorite fictional cannibal Hannibal, begin with the Whitechapel murders. The string of murders which have continued to puzzle criminal experts since the 1880s remain sensational, and the various speculations on the identity of this first icon of serial killers are often the most intriguing, if often ridiculous, tales of all. Rick Geary has a series of titles, dubbed A Treasury of Victorian Murder, which each examine a particular case of the time, from the Ripper to accused murderess Lizzie Borden. This volume is presented as journal following the case as it happened, obviously of a gentleman of the upper classes given his access to the crimes and their details, and Geary does an excellent job of presenting the case, the players, and the suspects without ever speculating on the killer's true identity. The artwork is suitably dark and strong, its woodcut style giving every image an almost physical weight on the page. Though graphic enough to transmit the severity and violence of the crimes, the art is never ghoulish in its portrayal of the victims. An admirable addition to Jack the Ripper titles, certain to delight young investigators and those in search of a good, chilling tale.

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Hellsing Volume 1
ISBN: 159307056X
by Kohta Hirano
Dark Horse 2003

Hellsing is the Church of England's Top Secret Vampire Repellent Bureau, and their number-one agent is Alucard, a domesticated vampire that obeys human beings. For some reason vampire activity all over the globe is increasing, so Alucard and his sidekick, Police Girl, have been very busy lately, dispatching ghouls and vampires with a variety of Big Guns loaded with silver bullets melted down from crosses.

Troubles arise when Alucard is dispatched to Northern Ireland to kill a vampire and runs afoul of Father Anderson, aka "Angel Dust Anderson," top agent of the Vatican_s super-secret Section XIII, Special Agency Iscariot. A brief turf war ensues: Alucard blows Father Anderson_s head off with his Big Gun, and Father Anderson pierces Alucard_s body with a hundred knives (there is a thoughtful text note explaining that Father Anderson keeps his knives in the 4th dimension, just in case you were wondering) and then cuts his head off. Both recover; Alucard later tells someone "it's been a long time since someone plucked off my head."

Hellsing has lots of comic book violence and gore, but is a very entertaining read. Recommended for high schoolers.

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Hellboy: Seeds of Destruction
ISBN: 1569713162
by Mike Mignola and John Byrne
Art by Mike Mignola, Mark Chiarello, and Matt Hollingsworth

Dark Horse Comics 1994

Hellboy-- you_d think the name would say it all. I had visions of devils dancing on shoulders with impish glee. The solid, heavily shadowed figure on the cover of Mike Mignola_s classic, however, should_ve clued me in -- Hellboy is far from an imp. In fact, he talks more like an ex-G.I. 1940s-era private detective than anything else, with the deadpan humor and bulky presence to match. He may indeed be a devil from hell -- no one_s really sure, not even him. Having emerged from_somewhere... into the company of members of the Bureau of Paranormal Research and Defense during the prevention of an evil Nazi scheme dubbed Ragnarok, Hellboy was immediately taken under the wing, and into the heart, of paranormal whiz kid Trevor Brutenholm. The big bright red guy grew to become their top investigator, and in the company of firestarter Liz Sherman and aquatic gentleman Abe Sapien, he fights the paranormal baddies with the best of them. Then his origins, or lack thereof, come back to haunt him, bringing with them murderous frogmen (yes, frogmen) and a vicious enemy no one predicted. Suddenly it_s seeming like the end of the world wasn_t so much prevented as delayed. Mike Mignola_s artwork is the true star of Hellboy, drawing noir influences into rich colors and a linear style very much his own and seeming to invoke Orson Welles_ ghost for editing in the panel jumps. The horror aspect is understated but potent while the action has a Raiders of the Lost Ark feel to it, minus too much cheese.

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Garlands of Moonlight

ISBN: 0971756406

By Jai Sen

Art by Rizky Wasisto Edi

Shoto Press, 2002

All is not well on the tiny Malaysian island where our story takes place. Maybe something bad happened here long ago... or maybe the near future holds a dark fate for the villagers under the protection of Marsiti, the local healer. Whether the sense of menace in the air comes from supernatural causes or from the oppressive presence of Dutch colonialists on the island is a subject of heated debate in the village, as farmers and merchants continue about their daily routines. When a woman is murdered and a baby disappears, Marsiti is the only one who recognizes the ominous traces of their killer. Marsiti_s knowledge of healing and "the old ways" of magic lead her towards the solution of the village_s mystery, but as she comes closer to revealing the evil in their midst, the townspeople_s fear and anger threaten to overwhelm their judgement.

Garlands of Moonlight, a pocket-sized story, is distinguished by Shoto Press_ characteristically gilded artwork. Wasisto Edi_s pencil drawings, illuminated with metallic silver, make every landscape ghostly. Individual characters seem to shine with an inner light as they move through darkened surroundings, heightening the story_s feeling of oppression. This is definitely a ghost story, and like the best around-the-campfire tales of its kind, we_re left with a lingering sense of dread after the last page.

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